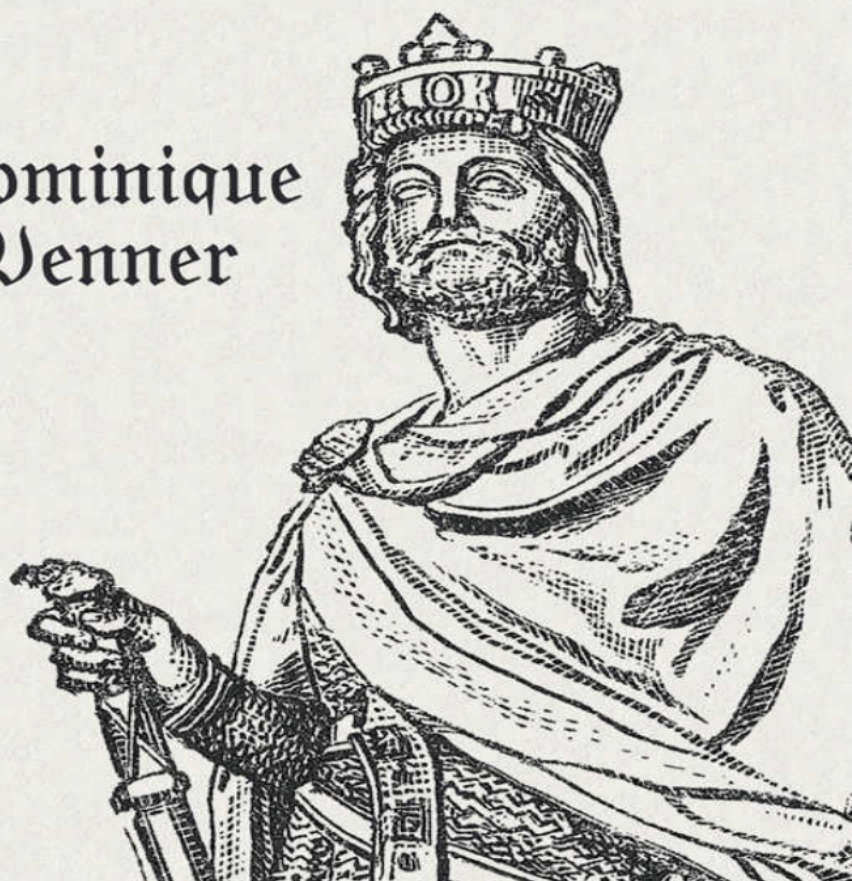


THE SHOCK OF HISTORY

RELIGION, MEMORY, IDENTITY



Dominique
Venner



Dominique Venner

The Shock of History
Religion, Memory, Identity

Interviews conducted by Pauline Lecomte

LONDON
ARKTOS
2015

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Foreword

BY PAUL GOTTFRIED

On May 21, 2013, Dominique Venner, confronted by events he could no longer control, committed suicide by shooting himself in the mouth in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Venner left behind a suicide note, explaining his horror at the gay marriage law that French President François Hollande had pushed through the National Assembly. He further lamented the self-destruction of his country and of European civilisation in general, a course of events that he ascribed to, among other causes, the reduction of heterosexual marriage to just another choice, and to the unwillingness of Western Europeans to keep their countries from being resettled by Muslims.

Thus there died a brilliant historian, who had also been a soldier for lost causes in his youth. The two identities in Venner's case were intertwined. In November 1956, Venner participated in a raid on the offices of the French Communist party in Paris in support of the freedom fighters in Hungary, who were combating a reinvasion by their Soviet occupiers. As a paratrooper, he had fought to keep Algeria French, and then, as a member of the Organisation of the Secret Army, he had tried to overthrow the government of Charles de Gaulle when the former French commander abandoned the French Algerian cause, for which he was jailed. Although Venner was rarely successful in the choices he made as a warrior, he saw himself as fighting for the European heritage as a man of the Right. As this collection of interviews produced near the end of his life makes clear, Venner believed that even in the face of rapid, unwelcome historical transformations, those of his persuasion were still free to commit themselves to what they considered to be just causes. Venner understood his 'voluntary death' as a choice he made in the hope of underlining a grave threat, while departing the world on his own terms.

It is by no means accidental that a large part of this volume is devoted to Venner's defence of suicide. Here the historian justifies a path that he himself would soon take. In his vindication of suicide, Venner relies exclusively on pagan authors. He believed that unlike its Christian successor, the Classical world had no problem with people ending their lives after careful consideration and in order to avoid an otherwise unbearable existence. Venner invokes the example of the Japanese author and admirer of Samurai culture, Yukio Mishima (1925–1970), who committed *seppuku*, in public view, as a social statement. Mishima, a Japanese traditionalist, was revolted by the triumph of Western liberalism and pacifism in his country and took his life to arouse others to combat the destruction of the traditional Japanese way of life. Other literary figures whose suicides Venner views as admirable attempts to end life as the actors saw fit are Henry de Montherlant (1895–1972) and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (1893–1945). Both, like Venner, came out of the cultural and political Right in France.

One does not have to dig too deeply in order to discover that the interviewee prefers the pagan to the Christian world. He fully accepts Nietzsche's view of the Christian tradition as the source of Western slave morality. Venner believed that the attempt to stave off social disintegration and the resettlement of Europe by Muslims from the Third World has been complicated by the eagerness of Christians to bow before a destructive fate out of moral conviction or misplaced guilt. Indeed, Christian churches were depicting the foreign invaders and the exhibitors of alternative lifestyles as the suffering just, for whom European Christians were urged to display loving acceptance.

If one explained to Venner that Christians had not always applied such teachings to their worldly situation, he would have answered that in an earlier age, Christians were still influenced by pagan legacies. They were still the descendants of Germanic and Latin tribes, and their scholars were still immersed in Classical works. Note that when Venner is asked to cite the seminal text out of which his civilisation sprang, it is not the Bible, but Homer and the Greek tragedies to which he points. He deplores the 'broken memory' of the

Western world, the inhabitants of which have been forced to espouse an alien religion.

Although Venner may be accused of having gone too far in identifying the entire Christian tradition with its present degenerate form, he correctly observes that paganism in no way previewed our present multicultural, feminist culture. The attempts by Christian traditionalists to blame what they find repulsive in our present age on a 'pagan' revival, is clearly absurd. The pagan world was masculine and heroic, and before its decadence in the Roman Empire, emphasised both sharply defined gender roles and sexual modesty. *Paganus*, like *agroikos* in Greek, meant rustic or of the countryside, and those who were associated with this simple life, were thought to show special reverence for local deities. The pagan tradition did not create the social deterioration that Venner saw all around him and which he obviously abhorred. If true pagans had accepted the state of affairs that Venner rejected, it would not have been out of a guilt-tinged love for those who were displacing them and destroying their institutions. Rather they would have believed that they were dealing with something that was Unchangeable and Fated. Unlike Christians, pagans viewed historical change as operating in a cyclical fashion.

Among Venner's many works on historical topics, there are several that should be mentioned to understand the range of his interests and interpretations. His *Critical History of the Resistance*^[1] and his *History of Collaboration*^[2] may be unique in their critical discussion of the French Resistance that arose in response to the German occupation during the Second World War. Venner stresses the degree to which traditional French nationalists played heroic roles in this struggle, in contrast to the French Communists, who went from collaborating with the invaders to killing their enemies after the German evacuation. Such works go deeply against the most treasured fictions of the Leftist establishment, and any attempt to tell the truth here may be a futile enterprise, except for those few who will listen.

Venner's work *The Century of 1914*^[3] is an intensive examination of the forces of European dissolution that were released by the completely avoidable catastrophe in 1914. Like Christopher Clark's

recent treatment of the outbreak of the Great War, *The Sleepwalkers*,^[4] Venner's book underscores the negligence and compounded errors on both sides that caused this irrevocable disaster. Among the many well-documented studies in military history published by Venner, his two-volume work on the Russian civil war, *The Whites and the Reds*,^[5] was his most widely acclaimed achievement. It was praised even in the Leftist press for its thoroughness and even-handedness.

Perhaps Venner's most significant contribution to historiographical sanity was his founding and direction of two periodicals: *Enquêtes sur l'Histoire* and *La Nouvelle Revue d'Histoire*. For anyone looking for alternatives to a profession now writhing under the weight of ideologically-driven fictions, Venner's periodicals were and remain indispensable. Despite his well-known repugnance for the Christian religion, his magazines give little indication of this anti-Christian bias. Here, Venner treats Catholic counterrevolutionaries as serious thinkers and presents their religious as well as political views in a dispassionate manner. This may be another strength of Venner as a scholar: his ability to lay aside his emotional investments and to deal with ideas that were not his own. Considering how deeply engaged he was in what he viewed as the cause of European civilisation, this professionalism seems all the more remarkable.

Paul Gottfried (b. 1941) has been one of America's leading intellectual historians and paleoconservative thinkers for over 40 years, and is the author of many books, including the landmark Conservatism in America (Palgrave, 2007) and War and Democracy (Arktos, 2012). A critic of the neoconservative movement, he has warned against the growing lack of distinctions between the Democratic and Republican parties and the rise of the managerial state. He has been acquainted with many of the leading American political figures of recent decades, including Richard Nixon and Patrick Buchanan. He is Professor Emeritus of Humanities at Elizabethtown College and a Guggenheim recipient.

[1] *Histoire Critique de la Résistance* (Paris: Pygmalion, 1995).

[2] *Histoire de la Collaboration* (Paris: Pygmalion, 2000).

[3] *Le Siècle de 1914* (Paris: Pygmalion, 2006).

[4] *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013).

[5] *Les Blancs et les Rouges: Histoire de la Guerre Civile Russe, 1917–1921* (Paris: Pygmalion,

1997).

Editor's Note

It is with a great sense of solemnity that we present this translation of Dominique Venner, which is the first of his major works to appear in print in English. I had originally contacted Mr Venner in spring 2011 about the possibility of Arktos publishing a translation of his work, *Histoire et tradition des Européens*. Venner responded by saying that, knowing that he was still largely unknown in the English-speaking world, he could instead prepare an original work with the intention of providing an overview of his principal ideas, and that Arktos could then publish an English version of it. I was pleasantly surprised by his generosity in this matter, and of course we eagerly accepted his offer.

I deeply regret that Arktos was unable to publish this book prior to Venner's dramatic, yet voluntary, death. Unfortunately, complications in obtaining the translation prevented us from doing so until now. It is quite clear, however, that Venner not only intended this book as an overview of his life's work, but also as an explication of the reasons why he had chosen to end his life in the manner that he did. It is my fervent wish that, belated though it may be, this book will yet serve as a means of introducing Venner to a new audience of readers, and will also provide a means for making sense of his final act.

Footnotes that were added by me are denoted with an 'Ed.' following them, and those that were added by the translator are denoted with 'Tr.' Those which were part of the original French text have no notation. Where sources in other languages have been cited, I have attempted to replace them with existing English-language editions. Citations to works for which I could locate no translation are retained in the edition in which they appeared in the original text. In the case of references to Venner's own works, we have given a translation of their titles in the main body of the text and provided the original French titles, along with their bibliographic details, in the footnotes.

I would like to thank Prof Paul Gottfried, who had been acquainted with Venner through correspondence, for kindly contributing the

Foreword to this volume. I would also like to extend my thanks to Greg Johnson, whose *Counter-Currents* Website first made me aware of the importance of Venner's writings, and who also contributed to the translation of the Introduction and the first two sections of the text.

Many of the ancient European traditions tell us that the spirits of our ancestors yet live with us and through us. This means that Dominique Venner still stands alongside those of us who consider the legacy and unique future of European civilisation to be something that is worth preserving and defending. Those who carry on this struggle, in whatever way we choose to do so, could be seen as his spiritual offspring. Venner's message of hope as contained in these pages should be an inspiration to us all. May this book make us aware of his continuing presence, and may it instruct us in how to be worthy of his example.

JOHN B MORGAN IV
Budapest, Hungary
20 July 2015

DOMINIQUE VENNÉR:

To Laurélie & Gary

CHARLIE WILSON (TRANSLATOR):

For Adam R, Linda C, and Ariel S for their
invaluable help and support.

1. Introduction

CIVILIZATION AND IDENTITY

The shock of history: we live it neither knowing it nor comprehending it. Many past eras have experienced similar shocks, and faced immense challenges, such as the Hellenes during the Persian Wars. Over centuries, 'modern' and contemporary, major shocks have caused responses that have heavily marked the history of ideas, significantly influencing personal and political worldviews over the long term. Machiavelli was born in the midst of a tumultuous period for Florence and Italy at the end of the fifteenth century; Montaigne in the French Wars of Religion; Hobbes at the time of the first English Civil War; Carl Schmitt into the German and European disaster that followed the Treaty of Versailles;^[1] Samuel Huntington into the newly emerging Cold War. Since the frightening European retreat following the Second World War, the disappearance of traditional sovereignties, and the end of the *jus publicum europaeum*^[2] that established limitations on war between states, and its replacement with the American concept of war crimes and the criminalisation of the enemy, Europeans are now confronted with a new shock of history that requires new answers. American hegemony has led to the complete globalisation of economics, much to the benefit of finance industry sharks and much to the detriment of the average person. To these blights we must also add the untold consequences of the invasion of Europe by masses of immigrants of exotic origin, completely incapable of assimilation, and the reawakening of former powers that, until recently, were considered dead.

Perceiving these historic disruptions has been at the very heart of my work as a historian since the beginning. This includes the relation between religion and politics, religion and identity, and the continuity and resurgence of civilisations, considered in their own right as particular expressions of the long-lasting identities of their peoples.

Thus, since the very dawn of her very long history, before she was even given her name, Europe found answers in a tradition that goes back to the poems of Homer, themselves an expression of Indo-European roots dating back many thousands of years.

Higher civilisations are not simply regions of the planet, they are different planets entirely.^[3] Much like our own in Europe, Chinese, Indian, Muslim, Native American, and Hispano-American civilisations all have roots that reach back into time immemorial. These roots often dig deep into the depths of pre-history itself. They rest upon specific traditions that are passed down through the ages in ever-changing forms. These are composed of spiritual values that build behaviours and nurture representations. If, for example, sexuality is universal in the same manner as eating, love is then different for each civilisation, as are representations of femininity, cuisine, architecture, the visual arts, and music. These all reflect a spiritual morphology, transmitted as much through atavism as through experience. These features make us who we are, unlike any other. They constitute our perennial tradition, our unique way of being men and women in the face of life, death, love, history, and fate. Without them we are fated to become nothing; to disappear into chaos, and into the chaos of a world dominated by others.

Fortunately, our tradition survives in our subconscious, despite having been forgotten due to old divisions that have shattered our memory, a memory further scarred by the delusive belief in our universal mission. A belief that is dangerously wrong.

More wrong than even Samuel Huntington could have imagined. It denies and destroys other cultures and civilisations, specifically those that threaten the universalist values said to be ‘Western’, that in reality exist simply for the benefit of globalising markets and ‘democracy’, summed up in the triptych: *fun, sex, and money*.^[4] It is clear to us, of course, that this globalist pretention rallies the resistance against itself, and even the revolt of peoples who refuse it.

This universalist belief is also dangerous for those of us in Europe. It stunts our ability to comprehend that other men do not feel, think, or live the same way we do. It is dangerous because it acts

destructively upon our own identity. After having colonised other peoples in the name of universalism, Europeans are now in the process of being colonised in the name of the very same principle against which they do not know how to defend themselves: if all men are brothers, nothing can stop the arrival of others on our doorstep.

In the past, when Europeans were strong and powerful, when they dominated the world, they had made of their Christian or secular culture, which in both cases was universalist and individualistic, the tool by which they conquered, intending to impose it upon the entire world. This was shattered following the upheavals of the twentieth century: both world wars in Europe, de-colonisation, and the reawakening of ancient civilisations. What had once been a source of strength has become the cause of their weakness. Their old universalistic worldview has removed their moral defences, in spite of their economic strength and a few vague stirrings of illusory power. Europe has been thrown, naked and defenceless, into a world aching to vengefully humiliate her.

Elsewhere, things are perceived far differently than the average European could ever imagine. To help elucidate this reality, I would like to cite two accounts drawn from French experience. The first is that of Dalil Boubakeur, rector of the mosque of Paris and President of the French Council of the Muslim Faith. He explains that Islam is ‘at once a religion, a community, a law, and a civilisation [...] it is not only those who practice the five pillars of Islam who are considered Muslims, but all those who take part in this identitarian whole’.^[5] The key word here is *identitarian*. In this way, Islam is not simply a religion. It is in fact much more than that: it is ‘a community, a law, a civilisation’.

This interpretation runs parallel to another account given by the philosopher André Comte-Sponville. In a book about atheism and religiosity, he mentions friends of his who identify as ‘atheist Jews’. The term left him dumbstruck. One cannot imagine Christians who identify as ‘atheist Christians’. He took it upon himself to discuss it with a former classmate, formerly a militant Maoist: ‘But do you believe in God?’^[6] His friend smiled: ‘You know, for a Jew, whether or

not one believes in God is not really the issue...’

For Comte-Sponville, who was raised a Catholic, this was antithetical to the central question of religion. His friend explained to him that it is a completely different issue: ‘God does not exist, but we are his chosen people...’ For him, being Jewish means being loyal to a particular history, tradition, law, book, and community. This loyalty has helped his people survive centuries without a state, a homeland, or ‘any other refuge than memory and fidelity’.

When we are immersed in Christian culture, which is at once universalist and individualist, this is surprising. However, many other religions, even Islam, as we have just seen, and of course Judaism, but also Hinduism, Shinto, or Confucianism, are not just religions in the Christian or secular sense of the word, namely a personal relationship with God, but also identities, laws, and communities.

The thinking that associates a group’s identity with its perennial tradition can help modern Europeans who are often de-Christianised by a deeply rooted culture of secularism. It can help them find the strong identitarian ties that lie beyond personal faith (or lack thereof). What ties? Precisely those of tradition. Ties capable of uniting Europeans with each other and arming them morally so that they may confront the impending threat of complete disappearance into the great void of the universal melting pot and of ‘brazilisation’. In the same way that some consider themselves sons of Shiva, Muhammad, Abraham, or Buddha, it is important that Europeans see themselves as sons of Homer, Ulysses, and Penelope.

The European tradition, whose origins predate Christianity, as Benedict XVI bravely reminded us in his Regensburg lecture on 12 September 2006, can be safely reconciled with religious convictions — or the lack thereof — since these have become a private matter in Europe. Whether one is Christian, free thinker, or whatever else on top of that, the point is that in order to resist and renew, we must rise above political and denominational variables and rediscover the permanence of tradition, which has permeated our founding poems for millennia.

These thoughts have been at the centre of my thinking for a long

time. The ongoing evolution of the world and of Europe continues to underline these issues. This is why, when Pauline Lecomte, a journalist specialising in the philosophy of history, asked me to collaborate with her on a book of interviews, allowing for a dynamic method of presenting my works and thoughts, I gave her my consent. The book that follows was born of this collaboration, for which I offer her my thanks.

DOMINIQUE VENNER

- [1] Carl Schmitt quickly became cognisant of this reality, writing about it in his 1932 study *Der Begriff des Politischen* (The Concept of the Political).
- [2] Schmitt used this term in his book, *The Nomos of the Earth*, to designate the reorganisation of the world and the first attempts at international law made by the European colonial powers during a period which he defined as beginning in the fifteenth century and drawing to a close at the end of the First World War.—Ed.
- [3] A phrase coined by René Marchand, a specialist in Islam.
- [4] This was in English in the original.—Tr.
- [5] *Le Figaro Magazine*, Saturday, 29 June 2002.
- [6] André Comte-Sponville, *L'Esprit de l'athéisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006), pp.46–48. (English translation: *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* [New York: Viking, 2007].—Ed.)

2. From Action to Reflection

PAULINE LECOMTE: In several books, notably *History and Tradition of Europeans*,^[1] you deliver a synthesis of the quest you have conducted since the start of your career. From the frescoes of pre-history to Botticelli, you reveal permanent features of the European spirit, for which you use the term ‘Borean’ in reference to the Hyperborea of the ancient Greeks. You also apply this term to the Homeric epics, the *Chansons de geste*,^[2] courtly romances, and the Arthurian Romances. You examine the spiritual foundations of our culture from a fresh perspective, embracing our ancestral heritage as a living, coherent whole. You place yourself in the midst a very ancient memory, rejecting the apparent splits and underlining often ignored continuities. For the latter you use the word ‘tradition’, which you have redefined. In addition to this, you call upon the inner recovery of a spiritual virility that respects femininity: ‘Verticality is intrinsic to masculinity and to the ancient European order. It distinguishes, raises, and attributes rank. It orders ideas and people within a hierarchy. The order of Homer is vertical, and the same can be said of language, elegance, grammar, dungeons, or the form we bestow upon authentic creations’ (*The Rebellious Heart*).^[3] Elsewhere, you insist upon the role of ideas in the course of history: ‘Whether they know it or not, men are dependent upon their representations and their ideas, even those that are uncertain or unconscious. Thus is it not wrong to claim that ideas rule the world? Despite appearances, human actions are not determined by their use, but by value systems in conflict. Eternally present is the obligation to win the battle of ideas, or else be brought down in its very substance’ (*The Century of 1914*). My first question then is: how would you describe yourself personally, beyond your occupation?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: I am a Frenchman from Europe, a French-speaking European, of Celtic and Germanic ancestry. By my father, I come from a long line of peasants from Lorraine, who originally came from Alemannic Switzerland in the seventeenth century. My mother’s

family originates in Provence and Vivarais. I was born in Paris. My genealogy, therefore, makes me European. But birth alone is insufficient; it is our consciousness that makes us who we are. I exist solely through my roots, a tradition, a history, and a territory.

PL: In *The Rebellious Heart*, you fondly evoke ‘an intolerant young man that carried within him the odour of a thunderstorm’, alluding to the violent period brought about by the Algerian War. What have been, if not your masters, your preferred readings?

DV: You bring to mind an earlier time, exhilarating and quite dangerous. The young man that I was believed he could change fate. It was also an adventure not to be missed. I had a vague feeling that what was offered to my generation would not present itself again. In those days, I recognised none as my master. The very history I lived and contemplated served as my master. I found stimulants and recipes in Lenin’s *What is to be Done?* and in Ernst von Salomon’s *The Outlaws*.

[4] My childhood reading instilled within me a certain view of the world that was ultimately disappointed. In no real order, I would cite *Éducation et discipline militaire chez les Anciens*, [5] a little book on Sparta given to me by my maternal grandfather, a former officer; *De Viris*, an imitation from Plutarch; [6] *La Légende de l’Aigle* [7] by Georges d’Esparbès. The *Iliad* translated by Leconte de Lisle [8] sat on my bookcase next to *La Bande des Ayaks* [9] by Jean-Louis Foncine and *Call of the Wild* by Jack London, before later reading his admirable *Martin Eden*. Those were the formative books of my tenth or twelfth year. Later, around the age of 20 or 25, I had naturally moved on to different reading material, but the political bookstores of the time were completely empty. There was a severe intellectual shortfall in those days the likes of which is scarcely imaginable by today’s standards. The young activist’s library, and even that of a bookworm, was very small. In mine, next to a number of historical books, one could find Malraux’s *The Conquerors*, Renan’s *La Réforme Intellectuelle et Morale*, [10] and Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, which I read again and again (it was on a higher level!), were given places of choice. However, though my ideas were limited, my instincts were deep. Soon thereafter, when I was still a soldier, I had a feeling that the Algerian

War was far different than what those naïve champions for French Algeria, with whom I did not share the dream of a multi-ethnic utopia, thought. My sympathy lay with the Europeans under threat. I also had the sense that it is healthy for a nation to have a ‘Tartar’s steppe’ at its borders, in order to keep itself alert and in shape, ‘like a gnat on Rome’s side’, to quote Scipio^[1] on Carthage.

PL: Today it is difficult to get a clear idea of what the intellectual movements and the course of actions in which you participated as a young man were, at the time of the Algerian War. What forces at that time would you say determined the fate of the country between Dien Bien Phu and the fall of French Algeria?

DV: In order to describe these various forces, one could mention a ‘patriotic’ or ‘nationalist’ movement of ideas and actions, a movement that manifested itself at the end of the fifties and lasted well into the sixties. It encouraged, among other things, the return to power of General de Gaulle in 1958, before eventually opposing him, with the feeling as though he had betrayed it. This movement cannot be separated from the broader historical movement that touched Europe as a whole. If one wants to understand anything about that era and our own, one must interpret European history in the twentieth century as a whole.

In short, it could be said that between 1914 and 1945, Europe experienced a repeat of the Thirty Years’ War, ending with the undisputed victory of two foreign powers: the United States and the Soviet Union. These two powers divided Europe between themselves at Yalta, imposing their respective ideologies upon her. Since that era, torn by her mistakes and excesses, Europe has entered a ‘state of dormancy’, cast out of history and imprisoned in remorse. The ‘patriotic’ movements that developed in France between Dien Bien Phu (1954) and the end of the Algerian War (1962) can be interpreted as instinctive revolts against this debasement of Europe, made especially painful in France by de-colonisation.

PL: In those days, when you were still quite young, you sought to rise against this debasement. At 20, you fought in Algeria as a soldier. You also fought against the Communists in the days of the Hungarian

Revolution. As a young student of 21, what was your state of mind?

DV: I was quite young indeed. Three years earlier, I had joined the army in counter-guerrilla operations in Algeria. In November of 1956, at the time of the uprising in Budapest against the Red Army,^[12] I had only just left the military. Three weeks earlier, I was still in the Algerian *djebels*^[13] leading a section of about thirty men, submachine gun in hand. Suffice it to say that my state of mind was not exactly pacifistic. For a long time, even if my ideology remained very basic, I knew that Communism was the enemy of Europe. This was the landscape in which I received my political ‘baptism’. I was 15 and the year was 1950. In France, this was the time of the First Indochina War. In this very old colony, the French Expeditionary Force fought against a guerrilla movement known as the Vietminh, which was supported by Communist China and the USSR. In France itself, the Communist Party, which had become extremely powerful since the Liberation of 1944, was leading an intensive propaganda campaign of defamation and libel. They were assaulting wounded soldiers even on their stretchers upon their return to France. I was revolted. At the time, I was a boarding student in a suburban Paris high school. Every Saturday, we would return home to see our families until Monday. On one particular Saturday, I led a small group of my fellow students to the local office of the Communist party, which was in a kind of shop. Causing quite a row, we attacked some opponents and then tore *L’Humanité*^[14] off the front display case. As usual, the paper was disparaging our soldiers. The whole thing caused quite a fuss. As a result I was expelled from my high school for a time. This was only the beginning. In 1956, during the Hungarian Revolution, as you said, I led the assault against the seat of the Communist Party in Paris.

PL: After 1956 and the fight for Budapest, you became involved in the Generals’ Putsch in 1961.^[15] This resulted in a lengthy prison term. What was it that instilled within you, to borrow the title of one of your books, a ‘rebellious heart’?

DV: My childhood was lived with war on the horizon, which left a significant mark on me. I was 5 when France was defeated in 1940. It was then that I saw the first German soldiers, and they looked like

soldiers. During the occupation, Paris was bombed, which I found exhilarating. As the liberation came, the streets were stained with blood. I saw many deaths up close, both French and German. Shortly thereafter, the First Indochina War started, which I had been following in the newspapers. Simultaneously, the Cold War came, along with the very real threat of an invasion facilitated by an aggressive Communist Party. At the end of the First Indochina war in 1954, trouble flared up in North Africa, which led to war in Algeria. I was barely 20.

After two years of service in Algeria, I wanted to continue the fight in the world of political agitation. I became convinced that the fate of Algeria would not be determined on the battlefield, but in Paris. From then on, the atmosphere was highly charged. I participated in the formation of a small political Free Corps^[16] that sought a kind of nationalist revolution. The idea was not as crazy as one might think. After all, following the crisis of May 1958, thanks to some very well-planned intrigues, General de Gaulle overthrew the Fourth Republic^[17] and assumed power.

Unfortunately, nothing was resolved. The new regime put in place by de Gaulle was not the nationalist revolution of which we had dreamed, and the fate of Algeria was looking bleaker by the minute.

The fight resumed quite soon after, this time against de Gaulle himself, and in an increasingly violent way. I was underground at the time, and I had been wanted by the police since the Week of the Barricades in January 1960,^[18] in which my Free Corps had participated.

Afterwards, one plot came after another in an atmosphere of intense excitement. I was in direct contact with a number of young officers and a few generals who would later participate in the Algiers Putsch of April 1961. It was at that very moment that I was arrested and imprisoned for eighteen months.

PL: It is then that you wrote your 'positive critique' of nationalism. What had changed during your imprisonment?

DV: The manifesto *For a Positive Critique*^[19] was written in prison, at the end of 1962, after the failure of the Organisation of the Secret

Army (OAS)^[20] and the fight for French Algeria. In my manifesto I confronted the dilemma of a historic defeat and charted new perspectives for the fights and ideas to come, rejecting any sense of nostalgia. At this point, everything had to be rebuilt from nothing. The conceptual strength of the thirties had been smashed after 1945 and the victory of the Communist and American systems, not to mention the political ‘purges’.^[21] The patriotic renewal of the Algerian War in 1954–1962 had produced nothing in the way of ideas save for a great confusion. After 1962, we found ourselves faced with a desert. In 1963, after being released from prison, and relying on the help of my Free Corps, which had by then been enriched by a fair number of students, I created Europe Action, a political and intellectual movement. This had some important consequences. It gave our nationalism a new, European dimension, freeing it from the reactionary mess of the Old Right. It benefitted from the use of the sciences, philosophy, and history. The work accomplished by Europe Action, imperfect though it was, was foundational. The New Right,^[22] at least up to the 1980s, owes much of its intellectual structure to this movement.

PL: A little over fifty years after the ‘Week of the Barricades’ in January 1960, what are your current opinions on your adversary of the day, General de Gaulle?

DV: I have devoted an entire essay to this complex figure entitled *De Gaulle: Greatness and Nothingness*,^[23] a title which I think perfectly underlines the ambiguity of this figure: greatness or nothingness? De Gaulle had an exceptional political aptitude and great ambitions, often at the expense of his compatriots. In procuring Algeria’s independence, he chose the worst possible method: supporting our enemies against the abandoned French Algerians, causing great tragedy to no avail. On the other hand, he created the institutional infrastructure for a kind of republican monarchy that solved a number of questions that had been facing France since the downfall of the monarchy in 1789. The problem is that he did so in a France whose unity he had broken, with little chance of genuine recovery. To the misfortune of his people, this exceptional man had much to say about

national greatness, but he severely lacked any noble-mindedness himself. He always remained a prisoner of his grudges and of the civil war mentality upon which he had twice built his 'fortune' — first between 1940 and 1944, and once again between 1960 and 1962. De Gaulle returned to power again in May of 1958 on the basis of a movement for national renovation. Ten years later, following unquestionable economic successes, he had completely forsaken this movement in favour of its antithesis, and so the Leftism of May '68^[24] triumphed, and has remained the dominant voice in education and the media ever since. However, in the interest of honesty and completion, we must nevertheless recognise his later movement towards a Franco-German reconciliation,^[25] which he had fought against for a long time.

PL: Would it not be appropriate to write a new *Positive Critique*, as you had once done in prison? What advice would you give today's identitarian militants?

DV: We do not redo that which we have already done in the past. I do not see myself eternally planting banners on unlikely barricades. A long time ago, I consciously and voluntarily removed myself from any political commitment, having understood that it is not my vocation. Political action, even of the most idealistic kind, has its own laws, greatness, baseness, compromises, vanities, and seedy quarrels. Beyond the intoxicating romanticism to which I had once yielded with great delight, I have learned that this reality was not for me. I had other tasks to fulfill, consistent with my aptitudes and with the times. I do, however, believe in the positive effects of radical thought. Despite its flaws, it facilitates a break with conservatism. I also believe in the formative benefits of a somewhat dangerous militancy. During the decade I devoted to intense 'activism', I came across a number of men who were either lost or simply mediocre, in addition to a few crooks, and some careerists too. But it was also during this time that I met some of the most estimable, the most courageous, and sometimes even the most intelligent men who I have ever known. Without the 'radical' militancy of my youth; without the hopes, illusions, disappointments, cowardice, baseness, unreasonable plots, prison time, failures, hard blows — but, conversely, without the admirable

loyalty to which I bore witness — without this exciting and cruel experience, I never would have become the meditative historian that I am today. It is total immersion in action, with both its most sordid and noble aspects, that has forged me and given me the ability to understand history from the inside, as an initiate, and not as a scholar obsessed with insignificant details or as a spectator duped by appearances.

PL: In your book *The Rebellious Heart*, you wrote by way of conclusion: ‘I am from the land of the tree and the forest, the oak and the wild boar, of vineyards and sloping roofs, songs of heroic deeds and fairy tales, of the winter solstice and Saint John’s Eve in the summer.’ Was this a declaration of faith?

DV: It was a response to those who pretend that Europe does not know who she is. It was a way of saying that my point of reference is found within myself, as close as possible to my roots, and not in some far-off land in which I am an outsider. The sanctuary in which I commune with myself is the deep and mysterious forest of my origins. My holy texts are the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*, the founding poems of the European soul. These poems draw from the same sources as the old Celtic and Germanic legends of which they supremely express the implicit spirituality. That said, it is not my intention to ignore the Christian centuries. The cathedral of Chartres is as much a part of my universe as Stonehenge or the Parthenon. Such is the heritage that I must come to terms with. European history is not simple. It is littered with ruptures beyond which we are tasked with recovering the spiritual continuity of our primordial tradition. By doing this, we find that Christianity, alien to Europe in its origins, was transformed from the inside by our ancestors: the Romans, the Gauls, and the Germans. It often existed as a transposition of the ancient pagan cults. Behind the saints, people continued to celebrate their familiar gods without asking themselves too many questions. Even in the monasteries, which had become havens of knowledge, the ancient texts were copied down, in some cases without being too heavily censored.

PL: In *The Rebellious Heart*, you wrote, ‘Dragons are vulnerable and mortal. Heroes and Gods can always come back. Fate exists but in the

spirit of man.' This evokes thoughts of Jünger, a friend of yours, who saw both Titans and Gods at work...

DV: You are right to mention Jünger. He was perceptive of the threats of the technological world, symbolically represented by the Titans of Hesiod's *Theogony*. These demigods rebelled against the Olympian Gods. Prometheus was the most famous of the Titans. We know of his fate following Zeus' triumph. We have indeed entered into the age of Titans, which has emerged from the Promethean aspect of the European spirit that has nearly spread across the whole world.

PL: What do you mean?

DV: Since the nineteenth century, the West has asserted itself as a techno-scientific 'civilisation', imposing a model of unlimited development upon the rest of the world. Conflated with human progress, economic and technical progress have taken precedence over all other considerations, be they political, social, aesthetic, or moral. This domination of techno-science rests upon a sort of tacit agreement between the techno-scientific elites and the whole of society. This has been the case until the day when catastrophes born from technical innovations began to arouse the fear that they may slip out of their masters' hands and emancipate themselves, a fear fuelled by genetic engineering and nanotechnologies. Some feared that genetic manipulations might uncontrollably spread through nature, stimulated by the will to power of specialised elites and the prospect of immense profits. The first major warning that technology was slipping out of its creator's control was in Japan at the beginning of 2011, when a seismic disaster caused a meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. As media outlets worldwide looked on, it was quickly discovered that the masters of the atom were no longer masters of their creation, and even worse, they were frightfully unaware of what was happening in the power plant's core, in the reactors that no one dared approach. Partially melted, the reactors seemed to have been endowed with a frightening semblance of autonomous life. The radioactive decay of the elements within them gave these monsters enough energy to maintain themselves for several months at upwards of 2000 degrees Celsius without the least human intervention.

Researchers from the French Commissariat à l'énergie atomique^[26] went as far as speaking in terms of war: 'We have entered into an armed conflict with our creation'. At Fukushima, our promise of mastery over the planet went up in smoke. It has nothing in common with typical natural or industrial disasters such as earthquakes, cyclones, or firedamp explosions. In one of the most advanced countries in the world, a machine 'ceased to be the submissive ally of its creator and gained mastery over itself, becoming hostile against its former master and seizing a territory for itself from which the latter is permanently excluded'. The metaphysic of the unlimited, which has been the driving force behind human progress, has suddenly met its limit. The question we must now ask is: how can we rediscover the Apollonian aspect of our civilisation in order to counterbalance the Promethean^[27] excess?

PL : In your *Dictionary for Those Who Love to Hunt*,^[28] you reveal the secrets of an old passion for wild nature, and you describe the secrets of your initiation in veiled terms. What did this initiation provide to you?

DV: Despite its title, this *Dictionary* is no dictionary. It is a pantheistic anthem of which the pretext of which is the hunt. I owe it my most cherished childhood memories. I also owe hunting the fact that I have been able to survive morally, and to have balanced myself during periods of intense despair that followed the collapse of my juvenile hopes. With or without a weapon, through hunting I return to my vital sources: the enchanted forest, silence, the mysteries of wild blood, and ancient clannish comradeship. To my mind, hunting is not a sport, it is a necessary ritual in which every participant, predator and prey, plays the role imposed upon him by nature. Along with childbirth, death, and seed-sowing, I believe that hunting, if practiced according to the rules, is the last primordial rite to have partially escaped defacement and manipulation at the hands of rational, scientific modernity.

PL: If there is an omnipresent figure in your book, it is definitely the forest, refuge of outlaws and rebels...

DV: All medieval literature, whether it be the *Chansons de geste* or

the Arthurian Romances, both saturated with Celtic spirituality, invariably explore the theme of the forest: a perilous world, refuge of spirits and fairies, hermits and dissidents, but also the place where the tormented soul of the knight, whether his name is Lancelot, Percival, or Ywain, is purified. I feel that very strongly. To me, going into the forest is far more than just a physical need, it is a spiritual necessity.

- [1] *Histoire et tradition des Européens: 30.000 ans d'identité* (Paris: Rocher, 2002).—Ed.
- [2] The 'Song of Deeds' refers to a genre of French epic poetry that flourished between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.—Ed.
- [3] *Le Cœur Rebelle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994).—Ed.
- [4] Ernst von Salomon (1902–1972) was a veteran of the German Freikorps paramilitary units of the Weimar period, and also participated in Germany's 'Conservative Revolution' intellectual movement. His novel, *The Outlaws* (London: Arktos, 2013), is based on his experiences in the Freikorps.—Ed.
- [5] Education and Military Discipline in the Ancient World.—Tr.
- [6] De Viris is a series of historical biographies by Plutarch, which was modeled after Petrarch's *Lives*.—Ed.
- [7] *La Légende de l'Aigle* (The Legend of the Eagle — Paris: Fayard, 1905).—Tr.
- [8] Charles Leconte de Lisle (1818–1894) was a poet who was known for his anti-democratic inclinations.—Ed.
- [9] *The Band of Ayaks*.—Ed.
- [10] Ernest Renan, *Intellectual and Moral Reform* (Paris: Lévy, 1871). No English version exists.—Ed.
- [11] Scipio the African (236–183 BCE) was a Roman general who fought in the Second Punic War, and is best-known for being the one who defeated Hannibal.—Ed.
- [12] Following the violent suppression of a student protest, a general revolt against their Russian occupiers and their Communist supporters began across Hungary on 23 October 1956. Resistance continued until the rebellion was finally crushed by the Russians on 10 November.—Ed.
- [13] Arabic: 'mountain ranges'.—Ed.
- [14] 'Mankind', the daily newspaper of the French Communist Party.—Ed.
- [15] On 21 April 1961, knowing that the French government had begun negotiations with the Algerian rebels for Algeria's independence, four retired French generals launched a coup, intending to first seize control of Algeria's major cities and then Paris itself. They were successful in seizing control of the strategic points of Algiers, and began making radio broadcasts calling for the French people and the military to rise up in support of them. This did not materialise, however, and the attempted coup disintegrated after only five days and those who had participated in it were arrested.—Ed.
- [16] The term 'Free Corps' originally referred to German mercenaries who fought during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More notoriously, it later referred to groups of nationalist veterans and paramilitaries which formed amidst the chaos that ensued in Germany after the First World War to fight against liberals and Communists.—Ed.
- [17] The Fourth Republic of France was the first government to be formed following the provisional government that had led the country in the months following France's liberation from German occupation. It lasted from October 1946 until October 1958, when it collapsed due to popular dissatisfaction with France's failures in the Algerian War and the prospect of Algerian independence, bringing Charles de Gaulle to power.—Ed.
- [18] On 24 January, believing that the French government had betrayed them in Algeria, French nationalists who opposed Algerian independence set up barricades in the streets of Algiers and seized government buildings there, hoping that the army would support them. This did not happen, and street fighting erupted between the nationalists and the military in which many were killed. The protesters surrendered on 1 February, and many of those who had supported them in France were also arrested, including Jean-Marie Le Pen.—Ed.
- [19] *Pour une Critique Positive* (Nice: IDées, 2013). An English translation has been published

at www.counter-currents.com/2010/09/for-a-positive-critique-part-1/.—Ed.

- [20] The OAS was an underground movement of French nationalists who, feeling that the political process in France had failed them in their attempt to retain Algeria as a colony, resorted to terrorism and political assassinations in the hope of achieving their aims. It carried out attacks during 1961 and 1962.—Ed.
- [21] Following France's liberation, the government jailed or executed many people who were convicted of having collaborated with the German occupation.—Ed.
- [22] Venner is referring to the French New Right metapolitical and philosophical movement that was founded by Alain de Benoist and his colleagues in 1968, centred upon his group, the Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne (GRECE).—Ed.
- [23] *De Gaulle: La Grandeur et le Néant* (Monaco: Rocher, 2004).—Ed.
- [24] In May 1968, a series of strikes by radical Left-wing student groups in Paris were joined by a strike of the majority of the French work-force, shutting down France and nearly bringing down the government of Charles de Gaulle. Although the strikes ended in failure and had evaporated by July, they are still seen as the decisive moment when traditional French society was forced to give way to the more liberal attitude that has come to define France in subsequent years.—Ed.
- [25] On 22 January 1963, de Gaulle signed the Élysée Treaty with West Germany, which brought about cooperation between the two nations.—Ed.
- [26] Atomic Energy Commission.
- [27] In Greek mythology, Apollo was the god of reason, whereas Prometheus was the god who stole fire from the gods to give it back to humanity, after it had been taken by Zeus as punishment.—Ed.
- [28] *Dictionnaire Amoureux de la Chasse* (Paris: Plon, 2000).—Ed.

3. Decline or Rebirth?

PAULINE LECOMTE: Dominique Venner, you have lived through the second half of the twentieth century, since the end of the Second World War. At that time, you were a child, but those days nevertheless left a significant mark on you. Later, as a teenager still very aware of historical events, you lived through the Cold War, the Soviet threat, American pressure on Europe, the First Indochina War, and the Algerian War, by which time you were in your twenties. You had by then become a very active participant in the events of your time. You bore witness to the uncertainty of General de Gaulle's return to power in 1958. You were heavily involved in the dramatic downfall of French Algeria. You participated in the Generals' Putsch and were jailed several times. You led a little political Free Corps, published journals, and undertook very dangerous actions. Later, you critically observed the rise of Leftism in May of '68, the terrorism of the RAF (Red Army Faction)^[1] in Germany, in addition to that of the Red Brigades^[2] in Italy, and eventually that of Islamism. You have observed the general regress of the White world, but also the end of Communism. Later still, you reflected upon all these events and phenomena in many of the books you have written, which we will discuss later. You created and edited important historical reviews, allowing some of the greatest historians a platform from which to interpret the past and illuminate the present. What continuities and what changes do you see today, in comparison to what you have witnessed in the past?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: Since the implosion of the USSR in 1991, the world has entered into a new era as passionate as it is dangerous. The Cold War had essentially frozen the movement of history, as it opposed two artificial world blocs against one another. When it ended, history finally began to move again. The fall of Communist universalism was, first and foremost, perceived as a definitive victory for its American counterpart, that is to say, global liberalism. This was an illusory victory. After ten years of chaos spanning the entirety of

the 1990s, Russia began to recover, building a nation-state in the great European tradition that had disappeared since the end of the two World Wars. As for the United States, despite its unmatched power, it began to decline, which has led it to start a number of uncertain military campaigns (Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan) and to attempt a containment strategy towards Russia, for both ideological and geopolitical reasons. Simultaneously, old civilisations and former powers began to re-awaken: China, India, the Muslim world, and South America. As for Europe, she remained in the state of prostrate dormition imposed upon her at end of the World Wars. She has remained morally crushed as a result of the remorse imposed upon her by her enemies, fearing the excesses she experienced between 1914 and 1945, and by the perverse consequences of a tendency towards cultural masochism. One of the dire consequences of this European regression has been the colonisation of Europe by extra-European migrants. However, this will not last forever. History has shown that nothing is ever completely unavoidable. Signs of popular awakening are arising all over Europe, evidence that Europeans are regaining their sense of self-awareness.

PL: In 1918, Oswald Spengler published the first volume of his famous book, *The Decline of the West*,^[3] specifically referring to Europe. About a century later, does the word 'West' still hold any significance? What meaning would you give it?

DV: You are right in underlining the fact that in Spengler's time, 'West' was synonymous with Europe. The Italian historian Emilio Gentile^[4] has stated that in 1900, at the start of the Exposition Universelle in Paris,^[5] 'civilisation rhymed with modernity, modernity with European, and European with Western'. At that time, the United States of America was still a marginal power that remained remote from Europe. In 1927, when the Catholic and Maurassian^[6] essayist Henri Massis^[7] published his book *Defence of the West*,^[8] the 'West' was conflated with France. More recently, Maurice Bardèche's^[9] review that was published from 1952 until 1982 and titled *Défense de l'Occident* was referring to Europe more than to the United States. It was especially during the period following 1950 that the word's

meaning changed because of the Cold War, the new East-West struggle that pitted the two victors of the Second World War against each other. From then on, 'The West' (the Occident) has been conflated with 'the west' (the cardinal direction), that is to say the United States, which was the main power in the face of a very real threat from the Soviet Union, before and after Stalin's death. Let's not forget that the bloody suppression of Hungary's national uprising happened in 1956 and that the Prague Spring was crushed in August 1968.^[10] Europeans, disarmed in their hearts and their arms after 1945, naturally gravitated towards America, which seemed at that time to be the only power capable of protecting them against a Soviet military invasion, which even General de Gaulle considered a serious threat by 1950.

PL: Recently, a whole series of essays have tried hard to describe the decline of the West, of Europe, and of France. The European Union seems to be losing its political weight, and European governments are losing their faith in economic globalism and the moral code of human rights. What are your thoughts on this?

DV: The decline of Europe is obvious, but I do not wish to join the chorus of pessimistic 'declinists'. I analysed this decline in *The Century of 1914*, which recounts, rather unconventionally, the history of the European twentieth century from 1914 to 1945, including various aborted attempts at recovery between 1920 and 1930.

My thesis was that, after the disaster caused by the two great wars, Europe entered into a state of 'dormancy', crushed militarily, politically, and morally by her own mistakes, her quasi-suicide, and her terrifying and useless expense of energy and blood. Completely demoralised by the notion that European civilisation could produce such horrors, the idea that it must be corrupt or cursed in some way began to creep into people's hearts and minds.

Moreover, after 1945, and symbolically after the Yalta conference in February 1945, the two victorious powers of the Second World War, the United States and the USSR, divided Europe between themselves, imposing upon her (each with their own method) their suzerainty, their social models, and their interpretation of history,

crushing her under the weight of an unprecedented guilt under the pretext of the Shoah. While Eastern Europe was sovietised by the USSR, Western Europe imported the United States' drug problem, mass consumption, and pornography.

In 1991, one of the two suzerain powers of 1945 suddenly imploded, replaced, as I said before, after ten years of chaos by a genuinely national Russia, who liberated herself from her Bolshevik past while still holding dear the glorious memories of 1945, when she triumphed over German invaders and occupied the Eastern half of Europe, thanks to her American and British allies. That one can be both patriotic and anti-Communist in Russia, while still being proud of Stalin's victorious Red Army, is a historical subtlety that is difficult to understand in the West.

PL: What happened to the second power that triumphed over Europe in 1945, the United States?

DV: After a euphoric period that barely lasted more than a decade after 1991, the United States undertook a series of serious failures militarily, geopolitically, and morally, which resulted in a significant weakening. I am thinking specifically of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East in general. Since the election of President Obama, domestic hardships following a major financial crisis, and a real inquiry into what American identity truly means, the latter having been remarkably analysed by Samuel Huntington in his last book *Who Are We?*,^[11] there seems to have been a general weakening of American power, which should be exploited by Europeans in order to snap out of their 'dormancy'.

However, make no mistake: Europeans are themselves responsible for the excesses of the economic and technical system of unlimited growth that they have engendered. Right from the beginning of the *Belle Époque*,^[12] the ubiquitous optimism had been challenged by those who foresaw the impending doom of modernity. These prophets of doom were proven right when, in the summer of 1914, disaster led to the outbreak of the Great War. This anxiety about the future was already present in the works of great artists like Wagner, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Zola, Dostoevsky, D H Lawrence, or Nietzsche. Admittedly, no

one could have anticipated what occurred between 1914 and 1945, but most saw trouble on the horizon for the future of modernity, that is to say, the 'civilisation' of science and reason.

PL: But aren't the triumphs of mechanisation, commerce, and technique integral parts of European civilisation?

DV: Of course, these have their roots in the European spirit, from its 'Promethean' or, as Spengler put it, 'Faustian' aspect. This aspect, which has become dominant, does not constitute the entirety of the European spirit. The other aspect, the one we might call 'Apollonian', and which is absolutely essential, has been hidden by the prodigies of Modernity. But as these prodigies morph into nightmares, should Europeans not be tempted to restore the Apollonian aspect of their culture in order to balance their Promethean excess? This is a question that I have already asked.

PL: Although the West appears to be declining within its own borders, it seems, conversely, to be expanding exponentially on a global scale. Its values are spreading under the pretence of being 'universal', and its technology is exported all over the globe. Does this mean that globalisation goes hand in hand with the homogenisation of culture and of particular ways of life? Is this the definition of Westernisation?

DV: These Western 'values' you speak of are in fact American values. You are referring to the messianic claim of Manifest Destiny,^[13] the 'New Zion' that seeks to impose its will upon the world. You are also referring to a system of wasteful economic predation and of financial speculation. Can this truly be called Westernisation? An Americanisation of the world? All over the world, it seems that technical modernisation often goes hand in hand with a rejection of Americanism, except in Europe, at least for the time being. Samuel Huntington believed that the coming resurgence of great civilisations would occur in opposition to the American West. He noted that modernisation often co-occurs with 'de-Westernisation'. One need only look at the Muslim world, India, China, and South America (not to mention many smaller civilisations) to see this reality made manifest. I do not believe in the homogenisation of cultures, even in Europe,

despite what certain corrupt elites would like us to believe.

PL: In what was formerly known as the Third World, more and more new powers are emerging as the days go by. China, specifically, represents an enigma in this sense. Will the twenty-first century be the century of the Chinese?

DV: It already is to some extent, which in a sense represents a sort of historical revenge, especially when you compare it with the state of China a century or so ago, around 1910. Since the end of the seemingly eternal ice age that was the Cold War, the world has once again begun to move, a phenomenon illustrated by immense cultural and geostrategic shifts. The world is entering into a new phase of history in which the historically unexpected has become possible again. These motions can be made to work in favour of a European awakening as the American cultural suzerainty begins to weaken. That said, I find it doubtful that the latter will go without a fight. As confirmed by secret documents posted to Wikileaks in 2010, American elites have favoured extra-European and Muslim invasions of Europe by immigrants in order to break and undermine the European people. On the surface, this appears to be working, but appearances can be deceiving. Unexpected resistance is slowly rising, a sign of what is to come. I do not believe that Europeans, upon learning that they are in danger, will allow themselves to be displaced. The past has shown that historic awakenings occur very slowly, but once they have begun, nothing can stop them.

PL: Are you optimistic about the future, then?

DV: I am a historical optimist. Unlike most intellectuals, I was a soldier before I became a contemplative historian. I would say that my rather unconventional way of looking at history is a result of my particular temperament. I take everything history has to offer in order to see the present clearly and properly anticipate the future. In the past, French academia pitted the Structuralist school that examined the long term (the *Annales* School)^[14] against those historians favouring the examination of specific events and the short term (the Battles school). I do not believe that these views are necessarily opposed to each other. In fact I believe that both are legitimate and

even complementary. We cannot ignore the history of events. It shows us that in history, the unexpected is king and that the future is often unpredictable: in 1910, no one expected the events of 1914; and no one in 1980 could have foreseen the fall of Communism ten years later. No one before 1989 expected a German reunification. At the same time, the long-term point of view shows us the powerful resilience of peoples and cultures. This is why I do not believe in historical inevitabilities as theorised by Spengler, Marx, and Fukuyama.^[15]

PL: What would you say is at stake for the world in the coming decades?

DV: Concerning Europe, it seems as though we will be forced to rise up and face immense challenges and fearsome catastrophes even beyond those posed by immigration. These hardships will present the opportunity for both a rebirth and a rediscovery of ourselves. I believe in those qualities that are specific to the European people, qualities currently in a state of dormancy. I believe in our active individuality, our inventiveness, and in the awakening of our energy. This awakening will undoubtedly come. When? I do not know, but I am positive that it will take place.

[1] The Red Army Faction was a Communist terrorist group based in West Germany that arose out of the German student protests of the 1960s. It carried out many attacks in Germany and throughout the world between 1970 and 1998.—Ed.

[2] The Red Brigades was a Communist terror organisation which carried out many attacks in Italy between 1970 and 1988.—Ed.

[3] *The Decline of the West*, 2 vols. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1926/1928).—Ed.

[4] Emilio Gentile (b. 1946) specialises in studying Fascism.—Ed.

[5] The Exposition Universelle was a series of world's fairs held in Paris. The one held in 1900 particularly emphasised the technical and scientific achievements of the previous century.—Ed.

[6] Charles Maurras (1868–1952) was a French counter-revolutionary philosopher who was the founder of the nationalist group Action Française.—Ed.

[7] Henri Massis (1886–1970)

[8] *Defence of the West* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1928).—Ed.

[9] Maurice Bardèche (1907–1998) was a French writer who advocated for nationalism and fascism throughout his life.—Ed.

[10] In 1968, the Czech government began initiating liberal reforms designed to loosen the restrictions placed upon society by Soviet-style Communism. The Russians, alarmed by the reforms, attempted to halt the reforms through negotiations. When this failed, the Russians reoccupied the country and violently crushed the opposition.—Ed.

[11] *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).—Ed.

[12] Literally 'Beautiful Epoch', referring to the period of optimism spanning from about 1871 until 1914.—Tr.

[13] (In English in the original text.—Tr.) The American concept of Manifest Destiny, which

was first coined in the mid-nineteenth century, originally referred to the belief of some that America had the right to continue expanding until it had filled the entire continent of North America. Since then it has also come to denote the idea that America should continue spreading its culture and its political and economic systems throughout the world.—Ed.

- [14] The *Annales* School, a school of historiography, was founded in 1929, but was taken in a new direction when the historian Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) began to assume the leadership of the group in the 1950s. Braudel believed that historiography was too focused on short-term events, such as crises, and specific events, while not enough attention was paid to the long-term development of history and those elements which remain consistent through long periods of time. Continuities, the school held, were much more important than sudden changes. They also rejected the Marxist view of historical materialism.—Ed.
- [15] Francis Fukuyama (b. 1952) is an American political philosopher who is best known for his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which postulated that with the triumph of liberal democracy at the end of the Cold War, humanity had attained the perfect form of government and that the remnants of other ideologies would soon pass away. It was viewed by many as the credo of America's political and economic dominance of the world during the 1990s.—Ed.

4. Hidden and Heroic Europe

PAULINE LECOMTE: You recently published an intellectual biography of Ernst Jünger, one of the most enigmatic figures of twentieth century Europe.^[1] Before gaining his reputation as a significant figure of the ‘Conservative Revolution’,^[2] Jünger fought heroically in the First World War. How did you discover his work?

DOMINIQUE VENNEN: It’s a long story. A long time ago, when I was writing the first version of my book *Baltikum*,^[3] about the German *Freikorps*, the embers of my time spent fighting in Algeria were still hot. The passions and the dreams of those days were still fresh in my mind. At the time, there was another German writer to whom I could relate more than Jünger. Ernst von Salomon was his name. You could say I felt a sort of kinship with him. The police were still hunting me down when I read his book *The Outlaws*, all the while imagining myself having similar exploits. It was as though something had been revealed to me. I was truly living the rebellion and the furor that poured forth from those pages. Weapons, dreams, foiled conspiracies, prison... Something Ernst Jünger had never experienced. As a young man, he served heroically in the First World War and was wounded fourteen times. Afterwards, he became a significant figure in the Conservative Revolution and quickly became hostile towards Hitler. It was then that he began to look at things from a more intellectual perspective. He was never a rebellious figure in the way von Salomon was. He recounted in his *Journal*^[4] that he was never inclined to take on such a role. He once stated that even the bravest soldier trembles in absolute fear when he stops operating within an established set of rules. This makes for a rather mediocre revolutionary. Military courage, which society holds in high esteem, has nothing to do with the political courage of a radical who opposes the system. The latter needs the moral armaments with which to face the contempt of the public. His justification must come from within. He must bravely face the dangers of repression and isolation. These are all things that I have experienced, and they all contributed to my training as a historian. I

had, however, started reading some of Jünger's books at the time. What initially drew me to them was the metallic phosphorescence of their style. Consequently, as I started to distance myself from political activism, so too did I begin to distance myself from Ernst von Salomon. I suddenly found myself connecting more and more to Jünger. He better met my new expectations. It was at this time that I set about reading his work more attentively. It was also at this time that I began to correspond with him, a correspondence which lasted until his death.

PL: In France, there is a lot of myth surrounding Jünger. Why do you think this is the case?

DV: Several reasons. The personal evolution I underwent was shared by many other French readers of Jünger. Political activism, whether red, black, or brown, filled literary imaginations from the thirties into the sixties. This was expressed in the works of T E Lawrence and André Malraux, as well as those of Ernst von Salomon. But the moment Europe registered the immense change that followed the Second World War, political activism no longer exerted the same fascination. This fascination was replaced by a desire to question both recent history and the possible direction our lives were to take in this obscure and distressing new world. In such a context, Jünger led the way with unparalleled nobility. Thus his work began to take on an unprecedented scope, especially in France. His love for French culture expressed itself in a number of his books, most notably in his *Journal de Guerre et d'Occupation, 1939–1948*.^[5] From 1941 to 1944, he was a military staff officer for the German forces in Paris, during which time he forged friendly ties with many of the capital's writers and artists, including Picasso. Further, when reconciliations between France and Germany were taking place, the French saw a positive image of Germany in Jünger, one that met their expectations.

PL: Do you think then that Jünger met a kind of implicit need?

DV: I think that Jünger's work meets the needs of a social unease that is distinctly French. Do not forget that France, in addition to Germany, has been the most abused Western European country in recent history, a country whose very own tradition had been dealt a

lasting scar even before the Revolution. In an era rife with discord and dereliction, Jünger's work can be seen as heralding a different fate. In him is the incarnation of a European archetype that has all but disappeared, at least temporarily, but of which there remains an occulted sense of nostalgia. This man, authenticated by his very existence, is worthy of our confidence. He is the complete opposite of those imposters who parade around on their high horses. That one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, and indeed one of the most cultivated, once led men into battle singing 'War is our mother!', without ever abandoning his convictions, is a very rare thing indeed. Writing in and of itself is no longer original. Jünger, however, lived what he would later write. He proved what kind of man he was through his actions before ever having written about them. The moral fibre of his being was forged in the fires of adversity.

PL: You have shown that Jünger was a very important figure in the Conservative Revolution. Does this movement have any resemblance to the French 'non-conformists' of the thirties?

DV: In France, the extraordinarily rich ideas of the Conservative Revolution (CR) are terribly misunderstood. This intellectual and political movement had its heyday between the twenties and thirties, before being suppressed when Hitler assumed power in 1933. Ernst Jünger was a primary figure in this movement in its most troubled period, during the rise of Nazism. Though not the one who came up with this formula, the spirit of the CR movement can be described as a coupling of both socialism and nationalism: 'Nationalism shall exist as an altruistic obligation towards the Reich, and socialism as an altruistic obligation towards the entirety of its people.'

To answer your question, it is important to remember that both France and Germany have been shaped by very different historical and political circumstances. One seemed to emerge from the Great War as a victor, while the other had been vanquished. However, when Jünger's writing is compared to that of Drieu La Rochelle's^[6] of the same era, we get the impression that Jünger is the victor and not the other way around.

It is impossible to sum up ideological currents in three words, but

the fact that among all available pronouns, 'I' reigns supreme in France as opposed to 'we' in Germany, is quite striking. In France, politics often take precedence, where in Germany philosophy reigns supreme, and with it, a strong sense of fate is coupled with a concept of metaphysics that slips away from rational causality. In his essay on Rivarol,^[7] Jünger compares the *clarity* of the French psyche with the *depth* of the German equivalent. He quotes the philosopher Hamann:^[8] 'Truths are metals growing underground'.^[9] Rivarol could have never expressed such a thing, 'He lacked the blind, seminal force required'.

PL: Could you explain the *Weltanschauung*^[10] held by Jünger in his youth?

DV: Despite its poorly chosen title, his essay *Der Arbeiter*^[11] paints a good picture in this regard. The first few pages contain one of the most violent polemics ever raised against bourgeois democracy, from which he believed Germany had been spared: 'In Germany, the dominating hands of the Third Estate^[12] never managed to penetrate into that heart of hearts that determines richness, strength, and fullness of life. Looking back on more than a century of German history, we can say with great certainty and pride that we have not been very good bourgeois.'^[13] Well said indeed, but the writer's artistry does not stop there: 'No, the German has not made a good bourgeois. Even at his strongest, he was the least. Even when we have thought the deepest and boldest of thoughts, felt with the greatest intensity, fought with the greatest dedication, it is impossible to remain ignorant of the revolt against the values raised by our grand declaration of independence from reason.' Hard to disagree. Nowhere in the world has criticism against French rationalism been so pronounced as in the Germany of Herder,^[14] or the England of Burke.^[15] With a language all his own, Jünger emphasises what he believes protected his fatherland: 'This country has no use for a concept of freedom that, like a measure that has been determined once and for all, is devoid of content.' In other words, he refuses to see freedom as a metaphysical concept. Jünger does not believe in the concept of freedom in itself, but of freedom as function, the freedom of force, for example: 'Our freedom manifests itself with maximum force

everywhere in which it is carried by the awareness of having been assigned to a fief.' This concept of an active freedom, 'assigned to a fief', was shared by the French in ages long since passed. French history, however, evolved in a direction that would ultimately uproot the ancient feudal, aristocratic freedoms, as Tocqueville, Taine, Renan, and a great many other historians have shown. When we read Jünger, it is understood that to him, in the period in which he wrote, it is in Germany and Germany alone that the old 'umbilical cord' of the bourgeoisie could be cut. He radicalises the dominant themes of the CR, pitting the stagnant peace of the bourgeoisie against eternal conflict, understood as an 'inner experience'. This is how he envisioned 1932. Sensitive to changing times, Jünger would divert his course for but a short time. During this time a mutual hostility began to entrench itself between himself, and Hitler and the NSDAP.

PL: Why do you think this hostility existed?

DV: First and foremost, it was the result of ideas being deformed by politics. Jünger felt as though his work had been desecrated. Further, he rejected Hitler's racial Darwinism, whose materialistic philosophy saw race as the one and only way of explaining history. Jünger always described himself as a 'Prussian'. So naturally he was opposed to the subjugation of the Prussian state, which incarnated a spiritual principle, to a group of brutal thugs who represented a real danger to Germany. As a real Prussian, he was in support of a strategic agreement with Bolshevik Russia, while Hitler, a south German, virulently hated Russia and actively sought to subjugate it. Finally, like many officers who participated in the Great War, Jünger knew that Hitler's worrisome foreign policy would lead to ruin.

PL: Despite the constant evolution of Jünger's thought throughout the twentieth century, do you think there exists any continuity within his work?

DV: Remember that Ernst Jünger was born in 1895 and died in 1998, at 103 years of age, having not lost one ounce of his intellectual vigour. His life very closely follows the course of the twentieth century. The martial vigour of his early work contrasts heavily with that of his twilight years, the latter repudiating all forms of

engagement in favour of a new-found Gothic wisdom. In reality, however, things are not that simple. Firstly, we need to get rid of all false interpretations. Jünger, despite the sensational proclamations made in *Der Arbeiter*, was never a dogmatic writer. He was simply a man who expressed his ideas in writing, ideas that were both independent and fiercely personal, written with stylistic flair, with no regard for coherence, and devoid of clichés. These ideas never ceased to evolve and change, as did the century in which they were written. He sometimes compared himself to a seismograph that records shock waves. This image seems rather appropriate to me. But despite these variations, both his thinking and his personal conduct were marked by an air of sincere nobility. He was both engaged in, and detached from, the century in which he lived. He also always managed to keep his distance from the baseness and infamy of his age.

PL: As not only a historian, but a man of reflection, what has Jünger meant to you?

DV: Some of his writings helped me to understand that the crisis facing the European people of today is not political. It is a spiritual and civilisational crisis that requires far more than just political solutions.

PL: How would you define Jünger's moral attitudes?

DV: The following quote from *Der Gordische Knoten*^[16] seems to clearly answer your question: 'In order to free oneself from the forces of darkness, the heart must be kept under control.'

PL: Why did you choose *An Alternative European Destiny*^[17] as a subtitle for your work on Jünger?

DV: In his life and his work, Jünger has given us a model that radically opposes that which swamps and asphyxiates us, a model that re-establishes a link with the most authentic sources of our tradition. For this reason, he incarnates the promise of an alternative future, beyond decadence.

PL: In one of your books, you mention Jean-Paul Sartre's opinion of Jünger: 'I hate Jünger, not as a German, but as an aristocrat.' Do you think it is accurate to think of him as an aristocrat?

DV: Jünger always distanced himself from the infamous and

disgraceful acts of his time. He proved that despite the disappearance of the European aristocracy as a social class, the qualities of honour, self-sacrifice, and of conduct could survive in those of elite character who, in decadent times, constitute a sort of hidden aristocracy.

PL: Are there any other examples that come to mind?

DV: A contemporary of Jünger whose fate was significantly more tragic comes to mind. Not quite as well-known as a result of the political instrumentalisation to which his death has been subjected. The person I'm thinking of is Claus von Stauffenberg.

PL: The man behind the assassination attempt on Hitler in July 1944?

DV: Indeed. If he is to be remembered as the most unwavering of Hitler's adversaries in 1944, it is not, as more simplistic interpretations would assert, out of love for American democracy, but out of a high-born and noble conception of the future of Germany and Europe. The young Colonel dreamed of a 'hidden Germany' in the same way that we think of a 'hidden Europe'. Further, he believed that certain elite men were appointed to accomplish noble things, and felt as though he was such a man. It was with this conviction that he drew the courage and the resolution to act despite the great risk and difficulty he would face as a result.

PL: Who was Stauffenberg?

DV: History remembers Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg as the primary instigator of the attack that failed to kill Hitler at the Wolf's Lair in Rastenburg, East Prussia on 20 July 1944. But what did the inner world of this hero look like? Bryan Singer's mediocre film *Valkyrie* starring Tom Cruise does little to educate us to this end. Despite its many faults, however, the film at least has the honour of popularising the figure of Stauffenberg. It also helped draw attention to an unsung historical fact: the only true German opposition to Hitler came from an aristocratic, Prussian military faction, composed partially of former National Socialists.

PL: How did this conspiracy take shape?

DV: There was no specific structure. It was composed of several unrelated groups. The civilian sphere was largely represented by Carl

Goerdeler, a 'National Conservative', and ex-mayor of Leipzig who was to become Chancellor of the new government. Other participants included diplomats like Ulrich von Hassell, as well as ideological think tanks like the 'Kreisau Circle'^[18] led by Count Helmuth von Moltke, a strict Lutheran judge. Its military sphere was based around Ludwig Beck (1880–1944), a retired general chosen to be Chief of Staff in the event of a successful coup. Having served as Chief of Staff of the Ground Forces (OKH) in 1935, Beck was instrumental in the creation of the Wehrmacht. Fearing the catastrophic effects of the new foreign policy unveiled by Hitler in November 1937, he wrote a report expressing his disapproval and resigned in August of 1938. Sensing that the *Führer's* politics of territorial expansion posed a mortal danger for Germany, he devised several coup attempts, including the one in July 1944. From the same military sphere there was also Field Marshall Erwin von Witzleben (1881–1944), who was stripped of his command in 1941 for expressing his opposition to the excessive violence on the Eastern Front. He was designated to become the Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht in the event of a successful coup. Other conspirators included the enigmatic Admiral Canaris, chief of the Abwehr, and his deputy Hans Oster.

The primary conspirator, however, was General Henning von Tresckow. He alone knew the links that connected the conspirators to each other. He relied heavily on his friend Stauffenberg, an exceptional officer who had been grievously wounded the previous year in North Africa.

PL: What role did Stauffenberg play on 20 July 1944?

DV: On the morning of 20 July, he took advantage of a convening notice on military service grounds. Despite his mutilated hand, he managed to prime one of the bombs provided to him by a co-conspirator. The device was inserted into a briefcase, which was then placed by Stauffenberg under the meeting room table, at Hitler's feet. He then excused himself from the room, not to protect himself from the blast, but because his presence was urgently required in Berlin. Having heard the explosion and having seen a body with what looked like Hitler's peacoat, he was convinced that the *Führer* had been killed.

Hurrying into an awaiting car, he bluffed his way past a number of military checkpoints and arrived at the Rastenburg airfield, where he climbed into a Heinkel bound for Berlin, where he was to initiate the following stages of the coup. He arrived at his destination only to find that Operation Valkyrie had barely started. Back at Rastenburg, General Fellgiebel, another conspirator, was tasked with cutting off all communication with the outside. However, upon learning that Hitler was still alive, he lost heart and abstained from his duties. News of the attack began to circulate among the General Staff, as did the announcement that Hitler had survived. This completely paralysed all those involved with the exception of Stauffenberg, who vainly struggled over the phone to execute the operation as planned. The news that Hitler was alive hit the radio at 6:30 that evening, damning the plot to failure. In Berlin, General Fromm, upon whom the success of Valkyrie was dependent, began to panic. In the interest of saving his own skin, he set out to arrest the co-conspirators in his presence, including General Beck, who shot himself in the head. Fromm, among others, was court martialed. Stauffenberg and three other officers were executed shortly after midnight in the courtyard of the Bendlerblock. It was at this time that Hitler made an address to the Germany people from Rastenburg, definitively ending Operation Valkyrie. Tresckow committed suicide the next morning. A 'People's Court' established by Hitler condemned 85 men to death. A number of officers were shot without trial. The estimated number of those executed following the failure of the plot is about 160.

PL: Do you think history would have changed had the attack been successful?

DV: No one can really answer that question. At the time, Ernst Jünger, who was close to some of those involved, recounted in his *Journal* that he feared a bloody civil war. He had little confidence in the elderly generals and young colonels involved in the plot against the ruthless efficiency of the NSDAP. The decision made by Roosevelt and Churchill at the Casablanca conference in January of 1943 had destroyed any possibility of negotiating with the victors, as they demanded an 'unconditional surrender'. This decision, foreign in every

sense of the word, accurately reflected the true goals of these two Anglo-Saxon thalassocracies,^[19] especially those of the United States. Beyond all ideological and moral pretences, the American oligarchy sought to obliterate Germany as a continental power once and for all, even if this meant an alliance with the Soviet Union. The United States made sure to interdict any kind of political reconstitution of Europe by imposing its own social system upon its new protectorate. The incredulous observer can see this ratified in the abolition of Prussia by Law 46 of the Allied Control Council in February 1947: 'The Prussian State, which from early days has been a bearer of militarism and reaction in Germany, has *de facto* ceased to exist.'

PL: What relation exists between Hitler and Prussia?

DV: Any historian worth his salt knows that the Prussian spirit is the antithesis of Hitlerian ideology. The former entails serving with honour, along with a commitment to the notion of personal responsibility. The opposition against Hitler that developed within the Wehrmacht after 1938 was born from this ideology. The decision to abolish the Prussian state is proof that the primary objective of the 'Allies' was not only to depose Adolf Hitler, but the destruction of one of the primary foundations of the ancient European order.

PL: What kind of family environment did Colonel Stauffenberg grow up in?

DV: Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg was born into a very old Swabian noble family on 15 November 1907 in Stuttgart. He was the third male child, preceded by his twin brothers, Alexander and Berthold, who were born in 1905. His father was of a practical mind, and held the values of the landed class close to his heart. He had been the right-hand man of the last king of Wurtemberg until his dethronement in November 1918. His mother had a strong poetic inclination. She made sure to pass on her great interest in poetry and literature to her children, opening their eyes to the poems of Goethe and Hölderlin, in addition to the music of Wagner.

In their adolescence, from 1919 to 1925, the young Stauffenberg brothers bore the marks of the events of their time: the painful memory of the German defeat, the threat of a Communist revolution,

the civil war in which the *Freikorps* faced off against the Communist *Spartakusbund*^[20] in the streets. Like many of their fellow students, they belonged to a movement of young nationalists who were related to the Conservative Revolution. The three brothers would undergo a spiritual evolution in which they would forsake the Christian conventions of their family in favour of a poetic pantheism. 'I have but one god now', proclaimed Claus, 'his name is Hölderlin'.

PL: Is it possible that this was all a result of his youthful enthusiasm?

DV: As it turns out, the Stauffenberg brothers would end up pushing their spiritual engagement much further than many of their contemporaries in the young nationalist movement. At the end of their adolescence, all three would become fervent disciples of the poet Stefan George,^[21] and not just any disciples either. In his adulthood, while performing his duties as the staff officer of an armoured division, Claus gladly read The Master's poems between conferences. He even became the executor of the poet's estate in 1943, ten years after his death. We can, of course, return to all of this after having talked about the entirety of the young Claus' life and career.

PL: When would you say that Claus decided to dedicate himself to the vocation of a military man?

DV: Based on information gleaned from his biographies, the ancient Greeks and Romans embodied his chivalric ideal, and inspired him to become an officer at a young age. Having been of fragile health, he compensated for this handicap by sheer force of will. In the spring of 1926, he was enrolled as a cadet in the 17th Cavalry Regiment of Bamberg. It was around this time that, along with his friend Jurgen Schmidt, he discovered his passion for the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. In August 1929, he finished his cavalry officer's training at the top of his class. An excellent jumping rider, he stood out among his comrades for his insatiable intellectual curiosity. Following his mother's example, he continued to be an avid reader. He would eventually end up marrying a young noble girl in 1933.

PL: 1933 was indeed a significant year, a turning point in German history...

DV: Indeed, it was also the year that Hitler took power, and most at the time were blind to the consequences that would ensue. On the night of 30 January 1933, the young Lieutenant von Stauffenberg was among those in the streets of Bamberg celebrating Hitler's appointment to the Chancellery. At the time, his general attitude reflected that of the majority of his compatriots. The first decisions made by the new Chancellor did much to mend the wounds of a nation humiliated. It is worth reminding ourselves here of Germany's fate following the Second World War, and the consequences of the great crisis of 1929: mass unemployment, destitution, and fear of a civil war with the Communists. Claus writes to his brother Berthold on 12 July 1933, 'We have rid ourselves of the Judeo-Bolshevik pest'.

PL: When people examine this particular period today, all they see are the atrocities it later produced. Would you say that contemporary viewpoints were different?

DV: In the early years of his regime, Hitler seemed as though he was a gift from providence itself. He accumulated success after success with impressive ease. He solved the issue of rampant unemployment, brought both the Communists and bankers to heel, and broke the chains imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. It was in this euphoric atmosphere that Claus von Stauffenberg continued his growth. In 1936, he was successfully enrolled in the *Kriegsakademie*^[22] in Berlin. After two years of study, he emerged in second place. He was then appointed second staff officer of the 1st Light Cavalry Division, whose horses had now been replaced by panzers. Unfortunately, a cloud loomed on the horizon: the anti-Semitic violence of the *Kristallnacht* on 7 November 1938, a reprisal against the assassination of Ernst von Rath in Paris by a young Jew. This pogrom was, of course, orchestrated by those in power. Claus confided his indignation to those close to him. Even so, nothing is ever black and white. In September of that same year, he wrote to a friend of his hope that the Sudeten Crisis^[23] would lead to war. This, of course, is the dream of any young officer. In this respect he was of a different opinion than General Beck, who would later become his co-conspirator in 1944. Chief of Staff of the German Ground Forces (OKH), Beck resigned in

fear that Hitler would lead Germany into a new world war that would, once again, leave Germany in ruins. The 'old' general had far greater foresight than the young officer.

During his interrogation by the Gestapo, Claus von Stauffenberg's older brother, Berthold, recounted that all three siblings were initially supporters of National Socialism, but eventually fell into opposition: 'The fundamental ideas of National Socialism have almost all been perverted into their antithesis by the regime.'

PL: On 1 September 1939, war finally started in Poland as a result of the Danzig Crisis.

DV: Heavily engaged in an aggressive foreign policy after his occupation of Czechoslovakia, feeling cornered by the German-Soviet pact, and having the sense that time was not on his side, Hitler decided to attack Poland. Thus France and England made declarations of war, contrary to his delusional expectations. What followed would inevitably tip Europe into the Second World War.

PL: Where was the young Claus during all of this?

DV: Claus participated in the lightning campaign against Poland, driving his division as far as Warsaw. His enthusiasm is palpable in letters he sent home to his wife.

A few months after the campaign in Poland, another would follow in France, with the same blistering speed as the one that preceded it. Claus' 6th Panzer Division broke through the Meuse near Sedan with impressive force. This was immediately followed by an astounding cavalcade across a devastated France. In the exhilaration of victory, Claus wrote to his wife, telling her that Hitler was 'the greatest military leader of all time'. A statement that he would certainly find himself recanting in the future! On the other hand, it is important to understand that, from a German perspective, this campaign in France was absolutely incredible. In less than one month, the Führer managed to accomplish what four bloody years in the trenches and 1.8 million deaths could not between 1914 and 1918.

PL: Can you evoke the chain of events that led to war on the Eastern Front?

DV: On 28 October 1940, unable to successfully come to an

agreement with England, Hitler informed his generals of his decision to invade the USSR in the first third of 1941. By this time, Claus had been transferred to the OKH Organisational Branch, which was a unique observational post well-suited to his keen and penetrating intellect. Here he discovered the flawed mess that was Hitler's system of command. That said, in the initial stages of the Eastern Front campaign, victory still seemed possible. This optimistic attitude did not last long.

The impressive German war machine immediately began to seize up as the autumn rain began to fall. The Battle of Moscow was the first significant loss suffered by the Wehrmacht, which suffered heavily in the harsh conditions of the cold Russian winter. This loss shattered the myth of the unstoppable German soldier, as well as that of the Führer's military genius. Claus' position at the OKH Organisational Branch allowed him to witness firsthand the blood price paid for Hitler's accumulating fumbles. The first significant strategic error took place on 22 August 1941 when, in spite of Guderian's^[24] advice to the contrary, Hitler redirected the German offensive towards Ukraine and Crimea. This fatal decision postponed the advance towards Moscow, which did not occur until a month later. As autumn rain would soon give way to harsh winter snow, this setback would undoubtedly lead to defeat. Having been more concerned with a fast victory than with properly equipping his armies for the Russian winter, Hitler's defeat was practically guaranteed. From his observation post, Stauffenberg looked on in outrage.

PL: Was it at this time that Stauffenberg began to consider outright rebellion?

DV: Rumours of reprisal massacres and ethnic cleansing certainly played a part in the growth of his indignation. Above all, he was appalled by the Führer's moronic (not to mention criminal) policy against the Russian and Ukrainian people. These people welcomed the German troops as liberators: men who freed them from the Bolshevik nightmare. Unfortunately, Hitler had none of it, and gave the order to treat them as enemies to be brutally massacred. Refusing to take up numerous opportunities to take advantage of Russian opposition to the

Stalinist regime, namely from men like General Vlasov^[25] who, among other young officers, was ready to side with Germany in a crusade to liberate Russia, Hitler threw them into Stalin's arms. Field Marshal von Manstein^[26] expressed this rather concisely when he said, 'We lost the war when, after having seized Kiev, we refused to fly the Ukrainian flag from the Rada.'

With the truth unveiled, and unable to do anything about it, Stauffenberg decided he had no choice but to revolt. What he lived and saw in Russia definitely persuaded him to make this choice. In a process of which history is rich with similar examples, his initial support for Hitler quickly turned to aversion and hatred. Starting in the autumn of 1942, he set out to find a leader. Every general he approached shirked the responsibility.

Fed up with it all, Stauffenberg asked to be transferred to a combat unit. In February of 1943, he was assigned to the 10th Panzer Division in North Africa (*Afrikakorps*) as their Chief of Staff. It was in this function that he was grievously wounded on 6 April 1943, losing his left eye, his right hand, and two fingers from his left hand. After being treated in Germany, all the while re-reading Hölderlin and working on a translation of the *Odyssey*, he asked to be reassigned to active duty. Thus with the rank of Colonel, he was made Chief of Staff of the *Ersatzheer*,^[27] which would become instrumental to his plans in Operation Valkyrie.

PL: At the beginning of 1943, one of his friends introduced him to Beck's resistance group who, though ineffective, had been active since 1938.

DV: Claus von Stauffenberg, however, brought something unique to the table: his action-oriented outlook and his sense of being unstopably driven by fate.

It was precisely at this time that the influence of a man incomprehensible to the rational mind upon the Stauffenberg brothers, Stefan George, was made manifest. In his influential work on the Conservative Revolution, historian Armin Mohler^[28] emphasised that he was 'by his personality and his work, as well as by some of his students, one of the main inspirations behind' this important

ideological current. In reality he was much more than that. In the archaic sense of the term, by his great personal charisma, his hieratic attitude, and his moving poetry, he was a Master. A photo taken in 1924 shows a young Claus and one of his brothers in awe of the poet's presence. The three had started to read George's pantheistic poetry from an edition adorned with the ancient Indo-European sign of the Gammadion,^[29] well before Hitler had taken exclusive use of the symbol. A reader of Nietzsche and Mallarmé in his youth, Stefan George grew to distance himself from gratuitous poetic styles in favour of a mystical engagement in which the legendarium of the great Germanic Emperors coexisted with the mysterious poetry of Hölderlin. Even before 1914, he began to outline his idea of a 'secret Germany', embodied by a small elite belonging to a 'Poetic State', opposed to the materialistic society of his time. His poems called for the awakening of a secret elite to protect the ancient flame. Claus von Stauffenberg was one of these elected few.

'You seek a new nobility', reads his '*Der Stern des Bundes*',^[30] 'Do not lead them to the throne with swords.../You will recognise your brothers/By the radiance in their eyes'.

PL: What was Stefan George's attitude following Germany's defeat in 1918 until his death in 1933?

DV: Working from the sidelines, he encouraged his disciples to act, encouraging their sense of selfless ambition, designating their role as a sort of ascetic military order. This instilled the feeling that he was on a crucial mission of regeneration within Stauffenberg. Beyond the obvious political aims, his act of sacrifice on 20 July 1944 served to cleanse the German people from the blemish of the *Führer's* regime.

Two weeks before he was to carry out the attack, he co-wrote a manifesto with his brothers and a friend, a sort of spiritual testament which sheds light on what motivated them to take action:

'We believe in the future of the German people. We know that the German people have within them the strengths required to lead the nations of the West towards a better life. We recognise the great traditions of our Western culture, a coalescence of Hellenic and Christian origins. We desire a New Order in which all Germans exist

as a pillar of the state, which in turn guarantees them both right and justice. However, we reject the egalitarian lie, and we bow before the hierarchies established by nature. We desire a population rooted in the soil of the nation, close to the forces of nature, which finds happiness in the circle of life to which it both belongs, who proudly and of its own free will masters the base passions of covetous desire and jealousy. We desire a leadership who, drawn from every social class, in harmony with the divine forces, and in the highest spirit, will lead each other in discipline and sacrifice. We unite ourselves into an unbreakable community, which, by its conduct and its actions, will serve the New Order and will beget for the leadership of the future the warriors they will require. We commit ourselves to live without reproach, to serve obediently, to remain in silence, and to mutually support each other.’^[31]

[1] Dominique Venner, *Ernst Jünger: Un autre destin européen* (Paris: Rocher, 2009).

[2] The Conservative Revolution is a term which has come to designate a loose confederation of anti-liberal German thinkers who wrote during the Weimar Republic. There was a great diversity of views within the ranks of the Conservative Revolutionaries, but in general they opposed both democratic capitalism and Communism in favour of a synthesis of aristocratic traditions and spiritual values with socialism.—Ed.

[3] *Baltikum; Dans le Reich de la Défaite, Le Combat des Corps-francs, 1918–1923* (Paris: R Laffont, 1974).—Ed.

[4] During the Second World War, Jünger kept a series of journals that were published in later years. In them, he recorded his thoughts on the events of the time and his objections to Hitler’s policies, and are regarded as being among his most important works.—Ed.

[5] *Journal During the War and the Occupation, 1939–1948* (Paris: R Julliard, 1965). No English translation exists.—Ed.

[6] Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (1893–1945) was a French writer who was a supporter of fascism and was a collaborator with the German occupation. Knowing that he would be reviled after the Liberation, he committed suicide.—Ed.

[7] Antoine de Rivarol (1753–1801) was a French writer who was a Royalist and a counterrevolutionary during the French Revolution. Jünger edited and published a book of his maxims in German in 1956.—Ed.

[8] Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) was one of the most important philosophers of the German Counter-Enlightenment and the *Sturm und Drang* movement, and he served as an inspiration to many of the Idealists (although he disagreed with Kant).—Ed.

critical of reason and the ideals of the Enlightenment.

[9] From a letter to J G Lindner dated 21 March 1759.—Ed.

[10] German: ‘worldview’.—Ed.

[11] *The Worker* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1932). No English version exists.—Ed.

[12] In pre-Revolutionary France, the general assembly of the French government was divided into three States-General: the clergy (First), the nobles (Second), and the commoners (Third).—Ed.

[13] Ernst Jünger, *Le Travailleur* (Paris: Editions Christian Bourgois, 1989).

[14] Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) was a German philosopher of the *Sturm und Drang* movement who held that national identity lies in the language and culture of a people.—Ed.

[15] Edmund Burke (1729–1797) was an Irish politician and philosopher who sat in the

House of Commons as a member of the Whig party. He was opposed to democracy and the French Revolution, although he did believe in the importance of representative government and supported the cause of the American Revolution. He was also involved for many years in addressing injustices perpetrated by the British East India Company in India.—Ed.

- [16] *The Gordian Knot* (Frankfurt: V Klostermann, 1953). No English version exists.—Ed.
- [17] *Ernst Jünger: Un Autre Destin Européen* (Paris: Rocher, 2009).—Ed.
- [18] The Kriesau Circle was the name given by the Gestapo to the group, which met at von Moltke's estate in Kriesau, Silesia.—Ed.
- [19] A thalassocracy is a political power that depends primarily on its naval forces.—Ed.
- [20] The Spartacus League was a revolutionary Communist movement that formed during the First World War, later becoming the Communist Party of Germany. They also formed armed paramilitary units during the Weimar years.—Ed.
- [21] Stefan George (1868–1933) was a German poet with a strong mystical bent who was regarded as one of the most prominent poets of his time, influenced by both Nietzsche and the French Symbolists. Some even regarded him as a prophet, and he always had a circle of devoted young disciples around him. He favoured an aristocratic view of hierarchy and spirituality, and, in spite of his artistic style, was an anti-modernist. Although the National Socialists appropriated him as a forerunner of theirs, George himself disliked National Socialism for being too bourgeois.—Ed.
- [22] The Prussian War Academy was the most important military school in Prussia. One's having attended it was required in order to serve on the German General Staff.—Ed.
- [23] The Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia was home to a sizeable German minority, and they were subjected to harassment and persecution by the Czechs. In September 1938 it appeared as though Germany would go to war against Czechoslovakia to protect them and annex their territories, but the Munich Agreement was successful in staving off armed conflict.—Ed.
- [24] Heinz Guderian (1888–1954) was a Wehrmacht General who was one of the pioneers of tank strategy. His frequent disagreements with Hitler, culminating in Hitler's decision to delay his drive on Moscow, which led to the failure of the Battle of Moscow. Guderian was relieved of command at his own request.—Ed.
- [25] Andrei Vlasov (1901–1946) was a Soviet Red Army general who was captured by the Germans in 1942. He told his captors that he had always been opposed to Stalin. Shortly thereafter, the Wehrmacht contacted Vlasov about helping in the German war effort against Stalin, and he suggested that be given command of an army comprising recruits from among the millions of Soviet prisoners the Germans had taken. The Germans were at first reluctant, but by September 1944 the strategic situation had grown so desperate that the Germans allowed the creation of the Russian Liberation Army. Vlasov won recruits by convincing the captured soldiers that they would be deported to Siberia as traitors if Stalin won the war. The efforts came about too late to affect the outcome of the war, however. Although they surrendered to the Western allies, Vlasov and many of his men were repatriated to the Soviet Union and executed after the war.—Ed.
- [26] Erich von Manstein (1887–1973) was one of the Wehrmacht's best generals, but due to his disagreements with Hitler about matters of strategy on the Eastern Front, which increased as the fortunes of war turned against them, he was relieved of command in March 1944.—Ed.
- [27] The Reserve Army was made of reservists who were on call within Germany itself. Operation Valkyrie called for them to depose the civilian government of the Third Reich under the false pretence that a coup by them against Hitler was underway.—Ed.
- [28] Armin Mohler (1920–2003) was a Swiss German historian and political philosopher. He is best-known as the author of the definitive study and bibliography of the German Conservative Revolution, *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918–1932*. He also worked with Alain de Benoist's *GRECE*.—Ed.
- [29] The ancient Greek name for the swastika.—Ed.
- [30] 'The Star of the Covenant'.—Ed.
- [31] Peter Hoffmann, *Stauffenberg: A Family History, 1905–1944* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

5. In the Face of Death

PAULINE LECOMTE: While we're discussing Colonel von Stauffenberg, you mentioned that his attack against Hitler was a sacrificial gesture, could you elaborate?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: Stauffenberg was well aware that 'Valkyrie' was unlikely to succeed. In spite of this, he carried out his role with firm determination. He knew full well that the lofty goals of his co-conspirators would be difficult to attain. Regardless, he put his body on the line as he both carried out the attack and undertook the ensuing operations in Berlin. On the night that everything fell apart, he was shot dead by a group of generals who sought to absolve themselves of their participation. Stauffenberg was ready to die, and so it is unlikely that this surprised him, in fact it may have even eased his mind. He had finally become the hero he had dreamt of becoming, despite the fact that his act was not recognised until years later. What he and his comrades from the 'George' group wrote in their manifesto explicitly demonstrated his desire to leave a mark on history. One that would outlive even his death, and it did. Stauffenberg knowingly acted in a self-sacrificial manner in order to prove that the 'hidden and heroic Germany', of which he was the incarnation, morally condemned the blemishes of Hitler's regime and called for a new Germany, wholly unrelated to the future *Bundesrepublik* imposed by the American victors. It was not, strictly speaking, a suicide, but it certainly was not far removed. It was his way of challenging fate and death.

PL: This tradition of voluntary death was held in high esteem in Japan, in ancient Rome, and even among the Gauls. On the other hand, it seems to have all but been forgotten in modern European culture.

DV: One of the most esteemed French writers of the twentieth century to have praised the act of voluntary death was Henry de Montherlant,^[1] who wrote a beautiful piece about it in his book, *Le Treizième César*.^[2] Montherlant belonged to a dual tradition that

revered both Catholicism and ancient Rome, a form of ecumenicalism that is far more common than one might think. The former has condemned suicide since Saint Augustine, who was simply repeating metaphysical arguments developed by Plato. Conversely, the stoic tradition of Rome held it in high regard, and has offered a number of exceptionally heroic examples. Besides Lucretia, who sought to attest her innocence following her rape by the sons of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus,^[3] the best known example was that of Cato of Utica,^[4] who served as a role model in Roman antiquity and beyond. Despite not having followed his example, Napoleon read Plutarch's account of Cato's suicide while on the *Bellerophon*.^[5]

Cato found Pompey less despicable than Caesar, and so took his side during the civil war. He had long decided that he would end his life if Caesar took power. Unfortunately for Cato, Pompey was defeated at Pharsalus and eventually killed in Egypt. At this time, Cato rallied the remnants of his army, escaped to what is now Tunisia, and locked himself in the citadel of Utica in northern Carthage. Here he concerned himself with securing and overseeing his supporters. Meanwhile, Caesar made it known that he was willing to grant him a pardon, to which Cato defiantly replied, 'I do not need the pardon of a tyrant.' He then set out to kill himself as an act of total freedom, in order provoke a rebirth of the tradition that died with him.

During his final night, he discussed various philosophical topics over dinner with his guests. When the meal was over, he sent them off affectionately. Once alone, he read a few lines from the *Phaedo*, the story of Socrates' death, without wavering before the text's condemnation of suicide. He then asked a servant to bring him a sword hidden for him by his son. Blade in hand, he proclaimed, 'I am now my own master!' And thus did he become master of his fate. He stabbed himself in the stomach after his servant left. Unfortunately, the wound was not mortal. A doctor arrived and stitched up the wound. Upon regaining consciousness, Cato ripped the stitches out, along with his entrails, and died. The ancient world celebrated Cato's death as a symbol of freedom from tyranny, notably from that imposed by Plato's morality. 'Cato, I grudge your death', said Caesar,

‘as you would have grudged me the preservation of your life’. Montherlant wrote beautifully of his death, as did Maurice Pinguet, who penned *La Mort volontaire au Japon*.^[6]

A writer in the Catholic tradition, Henry de Montherlant honoured a number of Roman suicides, notably that of the Prefect Publius Spendius, about whom he wrote a novel. Spendius committed suicide at the age of 53, in the year 210, under the Emperor Caracalla. He did so because he refused to live in a degenerate society that negated the Rome of his soul. His wife committed suicide with him. These couples’ suicides are common among the Romans.

PL: Your opinion states that a man’s convictions in the face of death determine his worth. Do you believe that voluntary death, as an extreme manifestation of Roman stoicism, conveys a noble yearning for honour and dignity?

DV: Convictions, prejudices, and sensitivities all play a role in suicide which, outside of unusual historical circumstances, remains remarkable. The suicide of the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima on 25 November 1970 was an act of protest against the disgraces that were at the root of his country’s decline. It had little in common with that of Stefan Zweig^[7] and his wife in 1942, which was a result of pure despair at their fate and that of the world. Yet the latter evokes more compassion. Death is the inevitable outcome of life. None escape it. Where, then, do our feelings of respect or of horror at those who voluntarily choose death originate? We often invoke despair as the motive for such acts, but there are others, as we have seen with Cato and Mishima.

In certain extreme circumstances, suicide is seen as a requirement for honour. Thus it is difficult for us not to feel respect for Admiral von Friedeburg, the last Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine who, after having fulfilled the tragic duty of signing his country’s capitulation in 1945, killed himself in order to preserve his dignity. Conversely, one might feel astonished that the commander of the entrenched French forces at Dien Bien Phu did not kill himself upon surrender.

In 1945, untold horrors were being committed against the civilian

population of Germany by the invading Soviet troops in Pomerania and East Prussia. This resulted in an incalculable number of suicides among the German population. In his *Journal de Guerre*, Ernst Jünger elucidated this fact: ‘We had faced a series of days that left us with a mortal wound, one unlike any in recent memory. This became especially clear to me at the home of Gerhardt Günther, who related a tale of pure horror to me. As the Russians arrived, he escaped the Pomeranian castle at which he was staying, and hid in a ditch dug in the centre of a clearing. Gunshots whipped his surroundings in a violent furor. In spite of this, the cries of women in a nearby farm could still be clearly heard as flames lit up the night sky. The mistress of the property, a young lady of thirty, killed her entire family, her ageing father, as well as her children, with morphine injections. She then shot herself in the head. None of these places bear names or monuments because they exist here in the millions.’^[8]

Was this young lady of whom Jünger speaks ready to undertake such an ordeal? Germans who lived through those dreadful years lived as though they were in the Japan of the samurai: ‘One must be ready for death morning and night, day after day’, states the *Hagakurê*.^[9] Why was this required of the samurai? Because the *Hagakurê* teaches that fear of death brings with it both cowardice and enslavement.

PL: The appalling circumstances of the time seemed to demand such extreme reactions. Are there any general conclusions that we can draw from them?

DV: As I stated above, before Plato, the ancient European tradition held suicide in the same esteem as the samurais of feudal Japan. Those who chose to end their lives were obeying the stoic tenet which stated that death is preferable to a life not worth living. They knew that suicide is a uniquely human privilege, of which even the gods are denied: ‘Not even God is all-capable’, proclaimed Pliny the Elder,^[10] ‘he is unable to end his own existence, much as he may desire to covet this most beautiful of privileges accorded to man in the face of life’s miseries.’ There are even a great number of female examples after Lucretia. Servilia, wife of Lepidus, comes to mind, or Arria, who upon plunging a dagger into her chest, encouraged her husband to do the

same: '*Paete non dolet*' ('Paetus, it does not hurt'). These examples illustrate the fact that the Romans, like patricians, cultivated a higher sense of dignity, courage, and duty.

The Greeks too, before Plato, justified suicide so long as it was done as an assertion of autonomy. The act had been implicitly justified in Achilles, hero of the *Iliad*, who had wilfully chosen a short life of glory over a long life of mediocrity. Further, Ajax absolves himself of the dishonour of disgraceful conduct by suicide. In *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles justifies a great number of suicides within the king of Thebes' entourage. The philosopher-poet Empedocles, who was one of the greatest thinkers before Socrates, was made famous after having thrown himself into the crater of mount Etna in 435 BCE, an act that was celebrated by Hölderlin. A further example from antiquity exists among the Gauls, who were known to commit suicide, much like the Romans did, in the face of defeat and slavery. Gaulish history is rich with examples like that of Brennus who, after leading an unsuccessful invasion of Greece, avoided capture by committing suicide. The warriors of Numantia also chose to end their lives as free men rather than live as Roman slaves. Conversely, Plato, a moralising man of abstraction, developed a metaphysical argument that abolished personal autonomy in favour of an idealised notion of 'good', later to be known as God. Through the character of Socrates in his *Phaedo*, he asserted that 'we have been confined to this nursery, and we are not allowed to free ourselves from it'. Thus did he transform the autonomous man into a slave in the name of a metaphysical speculation. Homer's gods, who knew how to hate, love, laugh, cry, and who instilled the unbridled passions of life into the hearts of well-bred men, were now asked to surrender themselves before an imaginary absolute. This metaphysical speculation attempted to supplant both sensitivity and poetry. Plato's argument was eventually taken up and developed further by Saint Augustine. It took a long time before finally, during the Renaissance, stoicism and the example set by the Romans were rediscovered and tolerated once more. Lucas Cranach^[1] could then paint his portraits of Lucretia driving a dagger into her chest to absolve herself of the dishonour unwillingly imposed upon her, and Montaigne could once

again admire Cato.

Meanwhile, armed nobility practiced duels in the name of preserving their honour, a manifestation of the permanence of loyalty and personal sovereignty.

PL: It would seem that politically motivated suicides were rather common in Europe during the various conflicts of the twentieth century.

DV: The especially dramatic circumstances of the era certainly favoured such acts. For example, on 30 May 1925, the German nationalist and author Moeller van den Bruck,^[12] a translator of Dostoevsky and founder of one of the more active Conservative Revolutionary clubs, killed himself. That year was marked by the cruel retreat of his future aspirations. Eight years later, the young Thierry Maulnier^[13] paid homage to him in the preface of his translation of van den Bruck's work: 'His suicide was not meant as a renunciation, it was meant to plant a seed; he wanted to give hope and incite action'. A rather generous thought.

In certain instances, suicide seems to grant a sort of ennobling grace in the sense that a voluntary death is charged with meaning in a way that a natural or accidental death is not. I have a few contemporary examples in mind, three writers who were involved in the war, and were noticed by Jünger in the first section of his *Journal de Guerre: Jardins et Routes*.^[14] He chose these three because, according to him, they exhibited extreme courage without giving way to hate. These writers are Drieu La Rochelle, Montherlant, and Saint-Exupéry.^[15] Jünger considers them among 'a small contingent of chivalrous nobility produced by the First Great War'. Despite the error concerning Saint-Exupéry's age (1900–1944), he was too young to serve in the first conflict. He served valourously as a pilot between 1940 and 1944.^[16] Fate drove these three French writers to a voluntary death, albeit in very different circumstances. This contributed to Jünger's decision to initiate them into his 'small contingent of chivalrous nobility'.

PL: Pierre Drieu La Rochelle's suicide is integral to his legendary character, far more important than his amorous conquests or his

Anglophilic elegance.

DV: Long after his death, his work continues to speak for its era. In his writings, he asks several important questions, all of which ultimately deal with his obsessive fear of decadence, the unrelenting decadence of the French bourgeoisie, which is a major theme in all his novels; and of France in general, to which he devoted many essays. Having been heavily influenced by Nietzsche and the Surrealists, in addition to having fought bravely and having been wounded several times in the First World War, he came to see fascism as a cure for the decadence that obsessed him. Following the calamity of the French defeat in 1940, he sincerely hoped a surge of new energy and a Franco-German reconcilliation would follow. Once the occupation had ended, he found himself cruelly let down by the collaboration and refused to live in exile in Switzerland, as had been offered to him.

Though politics fascinated him, Drieu La Rochelle himself was no politician. He was far too sensitive, honest, and thirsty for absolutes. His friend André Malraux once remarked to Frédéric Grover that Drieu was ‘...one of the most noble beings I have ever met’.^[17] When his illusions were shattered, he still refused to let go of his nobility of spirit. After having gone into hiding for a while, he ended his life on 15 March 1945. His motives were explained in a letter he wrote to his brother: ‘It fills me with great happiness to mix my blood with my ink, and consequently to solemnify the act of writing from all points of view.’

PL: What about Montherlant?

DV: Solemnifying the act of writing was a serious preoccupation of Henry de Montherlant. His was a rather complex personality. Some of his biographers have identified certain weaknesses of his that would be considered sinful by the Church, while still absolving him of them. He was certainly not the haughty character suggested by his magnificent prose and dramaturgical gifts. He effectively demonstrated that one can be a fantastic writer, one of the best in a generation, while still conceding to dubious personal conduct. That said, in one fell swoop his suicide absolved him of all blemish. On the afternoon of 21 September 1972, threatened with the prospect of

becoming blind and refusing to endure such a fate, he took his handgun and shot himself in the head.

In the words of Jean Cau,^[18] this act left ‘a proud signature written in blood at a particularly low point in his life. Every single lie was blown away by that single gunshot’.^[19] It was a very Roman death. It was so close to the image he wanted to paint of himself that he ultimately found himself ennobled by the act. *The Master of Santiago* and *The Cardinal of Spain*^[20] ceased to tell lies. Facing both himself and the empty skies ahead, Montherlant did not hesitate to act.

He left us a number of thoughts on suicide:^[21] ‘We commit suicide out of respect for life, when our lives are no longer worth living. Is there anything more honourable than this kind of respect for life?’ Very well put. Ethically speaking, the right to suicide is only limited by the sadness we might cause to those close to us, or by obligations requiring us to stay alive.

PL: Even though there is no proof that Saint-Exupéry’s final flight over the Mediterranean was intended as suicide, you seem to believe that that was indeed his goal.

DV: There is little doubt in my mind that that is the case. A charmer and something of a socialite, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry always lived a lavish lifestyle, having brushed arms with death hundreds of times while in the *Aéropostale*^[22] and during the war. Popular with the ladies, well-liked by critics, he attained literary success very early. Jealous naysayers often said that his immense print runs could only be those of an aristocrat. He was not considered to be among the accursed writers because, perhaps much to his misfortune, the narrow-minded often recommended his work for the instruction of children. From early on he felt as though he was in discord with the era he lived in. Having lost his faith in adolescence, he nevertheless felt himself tormented by a sort of mystic tension that led him to the realm of Nietzsche. Everything seems to show that his longing for the spiritual is what killed him, for everything around him seemed to fall into discord with it. His ‘Letter to General X’,^[23] written in 1943, explains the aversion he felt to the world that was being created before his eyes: ‘I hate my era with every fibre of my being...

Man is neutered, severed from his original resonances...' In a letter written on 30 July 1944, the eve of his death, he expressed his disgust with a world tainted by odious quarrels between Frenchmen: 'The termite mound that is the future horrifies me. I hate their robotic virtues...' Another letter has the air of a writer's farewell, with a palpable awareness of having used up the resources of both his life and his work:^[24] 'Four times I've experienced these close calls, a fact to which I am vertiginously indifferent. I am under the most naked and austere danger of attack.' In order to break free from a darkened future lacking any real goal, the only option left for him was to allow himself a death most worthy of him, to disappear into the sky.

PL: Is there any evidence of what happened on 31 July 1944?

DV: A number of inquiries have left us quite a bit of information. A weary faced Saint-Exupéry took off from the American airfield of Poretta in Corsica at 8:45 AM. He had been transferred there since the French had attempted to block him from flying. He was assigned to the 2/33 reconnaissance group, in which he piloted a twin-engined Lockheed P-38 Lightning. This very swift aircraft was unarmed. His mission was to take aerial photographs in order to provide maps for a future beach landing in Provence.

The writer-pilot had quite a good reputation as an aviator. He had already suffered three accidents on 6, 15, and 29 June. His bandaged body had suffered a fractured skull, a trepanation, a partially paralysed arm, several untreated wounds, and several mid-air blackouts. Logically speaking, in this state and at his age of 44, he should have been barred from flying. His status as a living legend, however, removed these obstacles. Using his connections as well as his notoriety, he obtained one last exemption. His flight on 31 July was the last one he was authorised to undertake.

He was expected back at noon. The hour passed with no sign of him. From 2:30 PM onwards, all hope was lost, considering that his fuel would have been exhausted. At 3:30, the intelligence officer^[25] reported that the 'pilot is presumed lost'.^[26] The news of this famous author's disappearance spread quickly, but soon the mystery subsided. It was not until 2003 that some underwater searches yielded a few

scattered remains of his P-38 off the coast of Marseille, identifiable by the serial number on the chassis. No remains of the pilot were found, save for a silver bracelet bearing his name found some time later by a fisherman.

PL: What kind of reflections do these three deaths, to whom we could add Jean Fontenoy,^[27] a contemporary and fellow author, who killed himself in the ruins of Berlin in May 1945, inspire within you?

DV: Drieu La Rochelle, Montherlant, Saint-Exupéry, Fontenoy: four separate fates, but all four extolled by their acts of self-sacrifice. From the moment they committed the act from which there is no turning back, nobility and dignity were emblazoned above their names. It often takes great courage to stay alive, but it also takes great courage to detach ourselves from the temptation to prolong our life despite both its degradation and the machinations of fate. ‘Just another minute please, Mr. Executioner’ is what each of us is tempted both to say and to think... In a time when people extol the value of life simply for the sake of living, regardless of its vacuity, voluntary death sometimes affirms values beyond enjoyment or usefulness, and offers horizons beyond the retirement home. In the sense that it restores meaning to death, and thus to life, this act constitutes a refutation of nihilism. It is a proclamation of sovereignty over one’s very self.

After having read a study entitled *Suicide Among the Romans*, Henry de Montherlant exclaimed, ‘With this, we can live!’^[28] This witty remark, paradoxical as it is, reminds me of Cioran,^[29] who said it was the thought of suicide that stopped him from killing himself.

[1] Henry de Montherlant (1895–1972) was a French writer from an aristocratic family. Critical of democracy, he welcomed the German occupation of France, and was treated as a collaborator after the war. Nevertheless, he remained a highly praised writer, and was elected to the Académie française in 1960.—Ed.

[2] *The Thirteenth Caesar* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). No English version exists.—Tr.

[3] This incident, which was perpetrated by the last King of the Roman Kingdom, led to popular dissatisfaction and the overthrow of the monarchy, and the transition of Rome into the Roman Republic.—Ed.

[4] Cato of Utica, or Cato the Younger, was a renowned orator and statesman in the Roman Republic.—Ed.

[5] The *Bellerophon* was a British ship that had played a key role throughout the Napoleonic Wars. Following his defeat at Waterloo, it was the *Bellerophon* that prevented his planned escape to America, and Napoleon surrendered to the British aboard it. He then spent several weeks as a prisoner aboard it as the British decided what to do with him.—Ed.

[6] *Voluntary Death in Japan* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

- [7] Stefan Zweig (1881–1942), a Jewish-Austrian novelist, was one of the most important writers of the 1920s and '30s. Although he and his wife had gone to Brazil to escape the Nazis, they nevertheless gave in to despair.—Ed.
- [8] Ernst Jünger, *Journal de Guerre et d'Occupation, 1939–1948*, p. 467.
- [9] *Hagakurê* was written at the end of the seventeenth century by the samurai Yamamoto Jocho. Commentaries by Yukio Mishima are available in *The Way of the Samurai: Yukio Mishima on Hagakure in Modern Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
- [10] Pliny the Elder (23–79) was a Roman philosopher and military commander. Following the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, which had just destroyed Pompeii, Pliny led a rescue expedition to the site, where he died, most likely from inhaling toxic gases from the volcano. He makes the statement quoted here in his *Natural History*.—Ed.
- [11] Lucas Cranach the Younger (1515–1586) was a German Renaissance painter.—Ed.
- [12] Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (1876–1925) was one of the principal authors of the German Conservative Revolution. He is best known for his 1923 book, *Germany's Third Empire* (London: Arktos, 2012). A follower of Nietzsche, he advocated the idea of a third German empire to replace the Weimar Republic which would embody a synthesis of socialism and nationalism and provide for the needs of all citizens, but within a hierarchical framework based on traditional values. Despite Hitler's appropriation of his book's title, he rejected National Socialism for its anti-intellectual nature in a note he left just prior to his suicide.
- [13] Thierry Maulnier (1909–1988) was a French writer of the Right who participated in the Action Française.—Ed.
- [14] *War Journal: Gardens and Streets* (Paris: C Bourgois, 1979). No English version exists.—Ed.
- [15] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900–1944) was a French writer and pioneering aviator, best known for his novel *The Little Prince*. After living in the United States for a period in an effort to convince America to enter the war against Germany, he served in the Air Force of the Free French forces during the Second World War and disappeared while on a reconnaissance mission.—Ed.
- [16] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry talks about his time as a fighter pilot in a wonderful book titled *Pilote de guerre* (War Pilot — Paris: Gallimard, 1942).
- [17] Frédéric Grover, *Six entretiens avec André Malraux* (Six Interviews With André Malraux — Paris: Gallimard-Idées, 1978).
- [18] Jean Cau was Secretary to Jean-Paul Sartre. He was also affiliated with the French New Right.
- [19] Jean Cau, *Croquis de mémoire* (Paris: Julliard, 1985). Republished by Grasset, 2007.
- [20] Both of these are plays by Henry de Montherlant. Both have been translated into English.—Ed.
- [21] *Le treizième César*.
- [22] A French airline that operated between 1918 and 1933.—Ed.
- [23] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wartime Writings, 1939–1944* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 135–139.
- [24] Saint-Exupéry left behind the unfinished manuscript of *Citadelle* (Gallimard 1948), which he himself had designated to be a posthumous work.
- [25] In English in the original.—Tr.
- [26] In English in the original.—Tr.
- [27] Jean Fontenoy (1899–1945) was a French journalist who was originally a Communist, but later supported fascism. He served as a volunteer in the Winter War in Finland, where he was seriously injured, and then became active as a political collaborator in France during the German occupation. He joined the Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism and fought on the Eastern Front, where he fought until the Battle of Berlin at the end of the war.—Ed.
- [28] *Le treizième César*, p. 37.
- [29] Emil Cioran (1911–1995) was a Romanian philosopher who was known as a supreme pessimist.—Ed.

6. An Adventurous Heart

PAULINE LECOMTE: In *History and Tradition of Europeans*, you spend a great deal of time talking about courtly love and Western femininity. You pay particular attention to the social presence of women since antiquity. Do you believe that there exists a sort of universal ‘eternal feminine’?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: Woman is simply ‘a man, like the others’, is she not? History and literature have spoken, showing that Emma Bovary is certainly not at all like Sanseverina in *The Charterhouse of Parma*. Nor is Sanseverina anything like Andromache mourning Hector; nor is she the Black slave girl in the Arab market of Zanzibar in *The Princess of Clèves*; nor, moreover, is she a Han Chinese peasant-woman at the founding of the Ming Dynasty. The joys, anguish, and fates of these women are bound to their era, location, race, culture, age, and social class.

In addition to this, there is an often ignored fact that lies right under our noses. In the great mystery that is life, how can we ignore the division between the sexes? That which applies to the flowering of plant life also applies to the animal kingdom, to which man belongs. Hesiod’s *Theogony* was very clear about this, a fact echoed by Heraclitus: ‘Nature likes opposites: through them, it produces harmony. It is thus that it unites man and woman, but not his fellow.’

PL: In other words, you are suggesting that the polarity between the sexes is required for both harmony and the perpetuation of life: is this also its appeal?

DV: It took the upheavals of the twentieth century for the eccentrics who asserted that one is not born man or woman, but becomes one or the other, to be heard. They would also likely have you believe that stags and does are not born as such, but become one or the other by grazing the pastures.

Based on my observation, the distinctive feature of all humans, regardless of race, is the aspect of their culture that transcends their animalistic nature. In other words, people are the sum of their

heredity, culture, and archetypes. Concerning the relationship between the sexes, the differences from one culture to the next are striking. Traditionally in the Middle East, despite the esteem held for older matriarchal figures, there is a general contempt for femininity. In China and India male births are favoured, while Islam certainly has no qualms about brutally stoning adulterous women, nor about whipping them into submission.^[2] 'If you fear highhandedness from your wives', teaches the Qur'an, 'remind them [of the teaching of God], then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them.'^[3] Lines like these shock Europeans, whose traditions have always celebrated the feminine in life, literature, and art. Evidence of this can be read in Homer, for example, manifested in the characters of Helen and Penelope.

In their ancient wisdom, Europeans knew very well that though exceptions exist, women, in the image of Venus, are fulfilled by affection and love, whereas men, in the image of Mars, are better fulfilled by struggle and conflict.

PL: This brings us back to the polarisation of disposition and function. Heraclitus states that this polarity brings with it mutual attraction, harmony, and life. Has this polarity perhaps been repressed or even hidden in certain periods?

DV: It was in the songs of the troubadours and by the quill of Chrétien de Troyes^[4] that, following a period of eclipse, the European spirit rediscovered a way of expressing the secrets of love and femininity, as described by Homer and Ovid, in the twelfth century. In the literary world of courtly romance, the noblewoman (who is often married) gives herself away with surprising autonomy to the knight who exhibits the greatest valour on the battlefield or on the tournament grounds. Having nothing left to prove in the order of masculinity, the warrior may now strip himself of his armour before his beloved lady. In the intimacy and reciprocal respect of a deeply polarised relationship, the authentic man may honour the gentleness, tenderness, and frivolity which characterise femininity, with the patience of child rearing.

PL: It is not terribly hard to find exceptions to the rule, of course.

History is rich in examples of women who, for example, undertook the role of a statesman. Elizabeth I, Queen of England in the sixteenth century, was undoubtedly a woman, a woman of power. Was she a model of femininity? The answer to that question is perhaps less certain. All through history, women have exercised political power in its fullest, and certainly did not shy away from the same cruelty and pugnacity displayed by their male counterparts. Women in this vein would include Theodora of Byzantium, Catherine II of Russia, or Margaret Thatcher, 'The Iron Lady'.

DV: If one is to believe radical feminists, political power has been monopolised by a male conspiracy that has its roots deep in the depths of prehistory. We are currently in the process of replaying a sort of new class war under the guise of a war of the sexes. But if men are masters of the world, are women then not masters of these masters? Madame de Tessin once echoed this sentiment in something she said to the philosopher Marmontel: 'As women, we do what we like with men.' This was in the eighteenth century, a time in France when women dominated society from their *salons*.^[5] At the very same time, many other women sat on the thrones of Europe: Catherine the Great in Russia, Maria Theresa in Austria, and Queen Anne in England. The revolution put an end to this feminine reign, at least in France. In a Europe which has been provisionally removed from history, politics concern themselves only with foreign aid and compassion.

That women, when necessity requires it, are able to publicly exhibit the aptitudes typically attributed to men is proved by a great number of examples. Does this mean that women as a whole rejoice in the aggressivity that is an integral part of economic and political power? That is less certain.

But to phrase the question in this way is to uniquely favour the function of virility and its pugnacious attributes. It causes one to completely forget that life within society rests upon the polarity of masculine and feminine. If the combative aspect is drawn from the masculine, an essential aspect of group survival, its perpetuation and its harmony, comes from the feminine. When the males fight, work and protect, the females maintain, transmit, rebuild, and pacify.

PL: I often wonder if there is a literary work that illustrates this fundamental polarity better than *Gone with the Wind*, a novel and film inspired by Margaret Mitchell's family memories in the old South during the Civil War. It is important to underline that this old South had retained much of its European character. You know this history very well, as you wrote about it in one of your first books: *White Sun of the Vanquished*.^[6]

DV: You are right to invoke *Gone with the Wind*. We follow four main characters across the narrative, two men and two women. The men are heavily engaged in warfare and politics. The first, Ashley, approaches these spheres in a much more idealistic manner than the second, Rhett Butler, who is much more cynical. The two women are much estranged from the world of their male counterparts. When the story begins, Scarlett O'Hara, a nasty character, only cares about her love life, while the sensible Melanie is getting ready for her upcoming wedding.

The men revel in the promise of war with the Northern states as they mount their horses. Conversely, the women plunge into anguish. That said, faced with the trials of warfare, they often show more determination and obstinacy than the men.

After three years of war, defeat lurks on the horizon as Atlanta is besieged. At this time, Melanie is fully committed to tending to the wounded, despite her advanced pregnancy. At the same time, the ever-superficial Scarlett concerns herself with nothing but her ablutions. All this changes when the two women have to escape the smouldering ruins of Atlanta. Scarlett's impressive vitality suddenly surges forth. In the flames of apocalyptic chaos, where does one go? Her instincts respond: Tara, the family estate, a safe haven.

After a horrendous journey, and the dramatic delivery of Melanie's child, the two young women finally arrive at Tara. The estate lies in ruins, the work of Northern soldiers. In the face of this catastrophe, Scarlett generates life from the void with all the vitality of a tigress, undertaking the most difficult of tasks. When a Yankee marauder arrives with less than noble intentions, she conquers her fear and, with Melanie's support, finds a revolver and shoots the intruder. When

it comes to defending the hearth, female pugnacity certainly does not compare unfavourably to its male equivalent.

The rest of the story is common knowledge. Scarlett is a bitch, but her powerful animality brings with it a surge of life. When the men come back from the war, broken and defeated, she evolves into an impressive businesswoman, inspiring vitality in the new South that is rising up around her. In her case, as in that of gentle Melanie, heroism is an appropriate term, a heroism without flags and without drums. Like childrearing, it manifests itself in the silence of everyday life and in the sacred tasks by which women give rise to life within the household on a daily basis. Yes, there is a sacred dimension to the everyday actions of women, because these actions renew life through housework, child care, food preparation, attention to ablutions, all things by which the household exists, and in which tradition is transmitted by example.

PL: In the West, specifically in Europe, would you say women are as much victims of male chauvinism as they are victims of the radical feminists, who share with the former an abysmal disdain for traditional household tasks?

DV: Women suffer from both, much like they suffer from an educational system that prepares them for jobs in which they are taught the logic of production and consumption, ultimately derailing them from their sacral function. Surely taking the bus or subway twice a day to face a department manager, colleagues, and surly clients is satisfying! The transmission of elementary knowledge, on the other hand, has been interrupted. As a result, publishers make a killing selling how-to manuals: how to educate your children, how to cook, how to clean your house, how to drive a nail, how to plant roses or radishes, how to sew a tablecloth or a nightshirt... Young married couples and young women are often transformed into invalids burdened with a diploma, all to the benefit of the consumption-based market system. These women are expected to spend their salaries on clothing of poor quality, maintaining the extremely profitable and useless mechanism of waste.

Now, now, now...nothing is ever as simple as it sounds...there are

plenty of women in politics, as well as in professional circles, and in jobs livelier still. Not to mention the odd female sailor who can make even the rudest of sailors go white with envy.

PL: Let's move on for a moment and talk about the world of high-risk sports, which has become a sort of substitute for warfare. This is a sphere from which women are certainly not absent, not to necessarily imply that this is something to which they are predisposed.

DV: Adventure has many faces. It is worn by lone sailors, rafters, kayakers, wilderness raiders, and those who scale mountains of breathtaking height. Was it not the thirst for gold that drove European conquistadors to Peru, deep into the Amazon, and up the icy slopes of the Himalayas and Mont Blanc? There is no scale in existence capable of weighing the spoils they coveted.

Adventure has changed significantly since the days of Joseph Conrad, and the crusades of André Citroën.^[7] But the need for a change of scenery, the nostalgia for the open sea, the thirst for a fenceless universe without interdictions, are far more pressing. Especially considering the fact that we are securely boxed into a hyper-regulated world. Mankind is endlessly dominated by technology and the economy. Perhaps sometimes it is necessary to prove to ourselves that we are more than just a good doctor, a happy 'manager', a thriving merchant, or a student with a bright future... In short, we feel the need to prove our true measure, to drag ourselves and carry our own weight, to submit ourselves to something more than business meals and trips out for dinner.

The adventurous heart^[8] takes pleasures in that which others would consider hell. The braver the undertaking, the greater the exhilaration. 'No beast on Earth' and even fewer reasonable men would dare go out and die of thirst in the Tanezrouft,^[9] freeze their feet in the Alps, or dive forty metres under the ocean.

But why do they do this? For nothing. To answer an inner need. Because no one has done it before. Because it is simply impossible to do it any other way.

Adventure is neither the result of calculation nor of ideology. It is free, useless, *use-less!* It overlooks any and all justification. It is its own

justification.

This is why adventurers and militants do a poor job, even if sometimes the ‘cause’ is used as a pretext for adventure and self-realisation. I do not doubt that among girls and boys who are attracted to the risks of rebellious action, whatever the colour of their flag may be, the allure of an adventure plays a part.

Under the scrutiny of higher reason, there is nothing more absurd or condemnable than the movement that drives many to break free from the pretentious framework of bourgeois wisdom. This is a framework that seeks shelter from the unpredictable and the dangerous, but where, periodically, danger vindicates itself and resurges in the most unpredictable ways.

The adventurous heart laughs at these illusions. It knows, along with hard science, that risk, mystery, the unexpected, and the irrational are constituents of the true order of life and of real reason. Jean Giono expressed this beautifully in *Le Hussard sur le toit*, when Angelo’s capricious mother gives him the following advice: ‘Always be very foolhardy, my dear, it’s the only way of getting a little pleasure out of life in this factory age of ours.’^[10]

PL: What enchanting advice. It goes well with the rebellious thinking that you have often evoked as a condition of rebirth.

DV: Rebels! Were you aware that that was how the Northern states referred to the Confederates during the Civil War? The Southern states picked it up and made a flag from it. Oftentimes the name one is given by his adversary is ennobled in the fires of combat. Two centuries later, in order to mock the companions of William of Orange,^[11] who revolted against the Spanish crown, the court of Philip II^[12] called them beggars. The word was adopted by William’s soldiers and sailors, who referred to themselves as ‘Sea Beggars’, and certainly showed the Duke of Alba and his successors what it meant to face such beggary!

The first act by which we free ourselves from tyranny, by which we enter into intellectual and moral rebellion, is to free ourselves from the power of words. It is by means of words, by their seductive, corrosive, and intimidating power, that an able system captures those it wishes to neutralise or dominate, and it does so well before falling

back on more dangerous weapons. Choosing the name by which one designates an adversary, christening him, is already to impose oneself upon him, to engage him without his knowledge, to prepare him for destruction. From the depths of the Gulag, Solzhenitsyn heroically reconquered his inner world, making himself a free man in spite of the barbed-wire fences and guard towers that surrounded him. Solzhenitsyn said that he first had to conquer the lie that Communism had instilled within him, the lie that constituted the crux of his difficulty. Words are strategic implements. To give yourself your own words, and above all to give yourself a name, is to affirm your existence, your autonomy, your freedom.

- [1] *The Princess of Clèves* is an anonymously-written novel that was published in France in 1678, dealing with intrigues at the court of the French King Henry II.—Ed.
- [2] The discriminatory contempt the Bible (Old Testament) holds against women anticipates that of the Qur'an, which endows it with a methodology. That said, upon reaching Europe, the founding text of Christianity was transformed by Western thought. All religions undergo an interior transformation by the peoples that adopt them, much like how the martial Buddhism practiced in feudal Japan is vastly different from the Buddhism practiced in China.
- [3] Surah 4:34.—Ed.
- [4] Chrétien de Troyes was a twelfth-century French poet who wrote many poems, most of which were related to the stories of the Arthurian Romances.—Ed.
- [5] A *salon* is a concept developed in Italy which grew to prominence in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In short, these were social gatherings often overseen by women in which literature, philosophy, and politics were discussed.—Tr.
- [6] *Le Blanc Soleil des Vaincus* (Paris: La Table ronde, 1975).—Ed.
- [7] André Citroën (1878–1935) was a French Jew and industrialist who founded a large automotive company which bore his name.—Ed.
- [8] This phrase was also the title of a book by Ernst Jünger.—Ed.
- [9] One of the most barren regions of the Sahara Desert.—Ed.
- [10] *The Horseman on the Roof* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 215.—Ed.
- [11] William I (1553–1584) was the Dutch leader of the revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs, which began the Eighty Years' War. He was assassinated by a supporter of the Spanish crown.—Ed.
- [12] Philip II (1527–1598) was the ruler of the Spanish Empire at the peak of its size and influence.—Ed.

7. Where We Came From

PAULINE LECOMTE: The title of one of your major works is *The Century of 1914*. Why did you choose this title?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: Historical centuries rarely coincide with those on the calendar. In this sense, a new century began in 1914 with a war the likes of which the world had never seen. Inaugurated in 1914, the twentieth century ended for Europe in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked the death of Communism and the dissolution of the USSR.

PL: In *The Century of 1914*, you give a historical overview that reiterates what you have been saying throughout your career, offering an unprecedented interpretation of European history in the twentieth century. Could you give us a summary?

DV: That book offers an explanation of the causes and consequences of 1914. It offers a meticulous analysis of the significant revolutionary movements and of the major conflicts of the twentieth century. It contains a great deal of reflection on history, politics, and the important actors involved in both. It begins first and foremost with an unprecedented account of the old European order, which was both reliable and modern well before 1914, an order destroyed by the Great War. From the ruins of this old order and of the war itself, there emerged four major ideological movements incarnated by four major figures: the American President Wilson, Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler. These ideologies were superimposed upon the conflict between these powers, and aggravated the merciless fighting that took up a good portion of the century.

PL: Going back to your conception of Europe pre-1914, you describe a world in fine form: traditional, yet very modern. How was it possible for the antinomic worlds of tradition and modernity to coexist?

DV: We tend to forget that before 1914, the great European powers, with the exception of France, which was afflicted with a defective republican system, were monarchies resting upon active and

modern nobilities. The German Reich's economic performance worried England so much that it ended up being one of the causes of the war.

PL: On the topic of nobility, what role did it play in Europe before 1914?

DV: Without falling into naïve idealism, we can note that nobility was not simply a matter of birth, but also of merit. This implies not only a constant renewal, but also the transmission of a code of ethics and behavioural rigour. The function of nobility, when it is indeed worthy of that title, is to command and protect. It also serves to offer a living example of a higher ideal, much like Homer's heroes did for the ancient Greeks. This was a very visible phenomenon in Great Britain before 1914. The British high aristocracy of lords and gentry made up a learning centre and a haven for open-minded political and social elites. This was made explicit at the start of the century, for example, by the creation of the original scouts movement by Lord Baden-Powell.^[1] In Germany and Prussia, the permanency of the nobility naturally rested upon its land wealth, but also on the solid education passed down from one generation to the next, who would each subconsciously interiorise the ethics of duty. In 1914 and until the end of the war, a few exceptions aside, the German bourgeoisie was vested with the values of Prussian nobility and of the authoritarian state, where firm power independent of private and class interests ensured the common good. Up until 1918, through the voices of Thomas Mann, Max Weber, Oswald Spengler, the theologian Ernst Troeltsch, and the historian Friedrich Meinecke, German intellectuals repeatedly affirmed the fact that freedom can only be conceived in relation to duty, and that service and human dignity are not opposed to each other.

PL: You say that the old European order was destroyed by the war in 1914. However, nothing was done to stop this destruction. Could one perhaps go so far as to say that the old order was responsible for its own demise?

DV: On the eve of 1914, the European order was truly in crisis. It was not the old order itself, but its forgetfulness and its negation that led to war. Since the end of the first Thirty Years' War in 1648, what

we call the ‘Concert of Europe’^[2] was founded on the notion that European nations belonged to the same family of peoples between whom warfare should be limited and subjected to the *jus gentium*.^[3] The Concert of Europe rested upon the civilisational values shared by the ruling elites. Yet since the end of the nineteenth century, this notion of shared values was brought into question by the democratisation of public life, which was the main cause of the national hatreds that ignited the hearts of the people in 1914. Later, the industrialisation of war immeasurably multiplied the destructive killing power of conventional weaponry. This double evolution of passion and technology was not the fruit of European civilisation but of its corruption. In their time, noble souls such as Taine, Renan, Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset, Nietzsche, Weber, and Toynbee all worried that this downward spiral would lead to catastrophe.

PL: Following 1918, were there no attempts to create a new European order?

DV: This was actually the goal of every ‘Third Position’ ideology between capitalism and Communism, which later manifested themselves in certain resistance movements. This was also the initial intention of Italian Fascism and of German National Socialism — ignoring, of course, the particularly Hitlerian doctrine of racial Darwinism, which was something else altogether. These two significant movements remained dependent, however, on the democratic fumbles that preceded them. They were wildly nationalistic in the aggressive sense of the word. They were by no means European. That said, their origins rested on the sane aspirations of the young generation who fought in the trenches: the desire to found a new aristocracy based on merit, combined with a socialism emancipated from class warfare and egalitarianism. The active part of this generation was composed of young, expeditious men who believed in the unlimited power of the will. In Germany, after the failure of the old elite in 1918, the changeover took place in 1933, helmed by new elites that had emerged from either the plebian class or from the war. In their cyclopean efforts, and under Hitler’s brutal delirium, they too ran aground, albeit in a far more permanent way than their

predecessors. Following the World Wars, there was nothing left of Europe but the ruins of her ancient civilisation and a massive waste, while the unrestrained domination of foreign powers and ideologies began their imposition. The result of this domination is the pseudo-European Union we know today.

PL: In your book, you take these ideologies seriously, but as ideologies are they not ultimately illusions?

DV: Even when they are perfectly utopian, ideologies determine the behaviour of men and communities the moment they take hold of their minds and imaginations, that is to say their 'representations'.

PL: What are the dominating representations in Europe today?

DV: Chiefly those imported by the powers that divided Europe at Yalta, Communism and Americanism. Two messianic systems whose geostrategic interests were opposed to each other, but who nevertheless remained united in their aversion for old Europe, her civilisation, and by the desire to make men homogenous economic agents. The goal of American capitalism (Adam Smith's^[4] 'soft commerce') is to maximise the profit of its beneficiaries, regardless of the price. Having become the dominant force in our societies, this objective has essentially become the supreme value, favoured by a general increase in the accessibility of consumable wealth.

The hatred for old Europe was also a major motivation for the Communists. They too wanted to create a new man, a *homo oeconomicus*,^[5] rational and unchanging, liberated from the 'shackles' that are his roots, nature, and culture. They also wanted to satiate their hatred for actual men, products of a hierarchy, and their great execration of old Europe, manifold and tragic. They sought to impose their religion of Humanity (with a capital H), singular, uniform, and universal.

And what does the American West want? Just about the same thing. The only difference lies in the methodology. Communists plan and terrorise, while Americans clandestinely use the persuasive powers of the advertising industry and espouse a *laissez-faire* attitude towards commerce.

'Soft commerce', which is simply another name for American

capitalism, does not only share its illustrious final goal with its enemy brothers, the Soviets: in order to change the world and make it uniform according to the needs of mass commerce, it too must change mankind into the *homo oeconomicus* of the future: the zombie, the new man, homogenous, devoid of depth, and possessed by the spirit of unlimited universal commerce. The zombie is happy. He is told he will find happiness in satisfying his desires, because his desires generate revenue.

PL: There are still unforeseen financial crises, as well as opposition...

DV: In order to alleviate the former, we call upon the state (*save the banks!*) by socialising their losses. As far as opposition is concerned, no expense is spared in defeating them. In order to zombify the once rebellious European people, mass immigration has proved most useful. This has allowed the importation of cheap foreign labour, all the while destroying national identities. The installation of non-native living areas further accelerates the proletarianisation of European workers. Deprived of the protective powers of a coherent nation, they become 'naked proletariats', zombies in power, as they are blamed for imaginary crimes attributed to their ancestors, such as colonisation.

An unexpected difficulty, however, has come from the immigrants themselves. Strangers to European social conduct, they have built Islamised communities in the ghettos. Entire regions of sovereign territories are now breaking free from the laws of the republic in favour of self-government, policed by the 'older brothers' of their communities.^[6]

The dream of cohabitation with indigenous Europeans is only possible in films. Those unable to escape into less occupied neighbourhoods hide away, expressing their suffering through protest votes. An unexpected consequence of this is that class warfare becomes ethnic division.

There are also instances of Europeans who balk at their 'zombification'. In order to sweeten the pill, the system decided, in a stroke of genius, to use the sons and grandsons of old Stalinists and

Trotskyists to recycle campaigns championing sexual liberation, and to lead the sacralisation of immigrants for the glorification of 'soft commerce'. These become the inquisitorial clergy of the new religion of humanity, this new opiate of the masses for whom football games serve as the high mass. This religion's tablets of law are human rights, or the right to zombification, which becomes man's moral obligation. The dogmas are those of humanitarianism, whose secular arm is NATO, national, and international courts. Its witchhunters seek out and destroy difference, individuality, love of life, nature, the past, critical thinking, and those who refuse to be martyred before the almighty deity of humanitarianism.

PL: How do you explain the surprising complicity between the oligarchies who are tied to their wallets, and those who purportedly oppose them on the Left?

DV: One characteristic of this system is that it is fed by opposition. To be surprised at the symbiosis of these apparent polarities is to forget that Leftist opposition shares the same humanitarian religion and desire to destroy as the system it claims to oppose. We forget that 'soft commerce' needs a counter-culture, needs to be challenged, in order to feed the endless appetite for the 'unrestrained pursuit of pleasure' that nourishes the market. It uses the artificial rebellion of the cultural community to its advantage. It even institutionalises it. This is the role of ministries of culture, who make fabulous commissions of officialised non-art. The most bizarre experimental forms simply echo the language of the advertising industry and of high fashion, both of which are nourished by novelty, of what is 'in' or 'happening'. Rights of ethnic, sexual, and other minorities are limitlessly extended as they materialise into new markets, offering further moral security to the system. The horizons of 'soft commerce' are unlimited. It benefits from the work of moles in culture: showbusiness, teaching, academia, medicine, law, and the prison system. Naïve fools who find themselves outraged at the sight of outrageous or repugnant buffooneries have failed to understand that these have been promoted to the rank of merchandise, and have been made both indispensable and ennobled.

The only form of protest that the system is unable to swallow is that which rejects the religion of Humanity, and which respects identitarian diversity. Those who are firmly rooted in their city, tribe, culture, or nation, and who in turn respect those of others, cannot be dissolved into the 'soft commerce' system. They are often called 'protestors' or 'populists'.

In spite of much patriotic sabre-rattling, England and France are no more masters of their destiny than any other European nation. Europe remains culturally and strategically positioned within the suzerain power of the Atlantic zone, which destroys the possibility of any kind of 'identitarian liberation'. This power is felt at all levels, from the European Union itself, to NATO, as well as in the heart of every nation it touches.

PL: You seem to be saying that the seductive ideal of individual freedom and the openness of the liberal world masks the predatory power of the oligarchies of the media. You are also saying that the all-encompassing power of the free market makes consumer citizens slaves to merchandise.

DV: Once expression is freed, anything is possible. This is why it is important to believe in the merits of authentic democracy, such as what exists in Switzerland, in which citizens are truly able to express themselves. Despite the presence of electoral practices, most Europeans do not live in democracies. The 'cosmocratic' system (that is to say the globalist powers) that has its origins in America is absolutely 'totalitarian'. This system's distinction between public and private exists in words only. It intervenes in schooling by means of 'civic' education, which serves as ideological brainwashing in which every aspect of life is divided into the Manichaeian categories of Good and Evil. The system even intervenes in our private lives. For example, a landowner does not have the right to choose the person to whom he wishes to sell his property. If he decides he wants to exercise his legitimate right to national preference, he is chased into the courts and convicted. The same is true in the recruitment of employees and other types of associates. Woe to those who would rather choose people who resemble themselves and inspire confidence in them,

unless they belong to a minority given special privileges under the law. Accusations of 'racism' lead to social and civic death. Hunted down by a pitiless inquisition, the accused will be convicted by the long 'secular arm' of the law.

PL: I would like to bring us back to your interpretation of the negative influence exercised by the United States in Europe since the Second World War, a war that lifted the former to the summit while destroying the latter. Having written two books about the American Civil War and its indirect causes, you know quite a bit about American history. Are they not sons of Europe?

DV: It is true that the United States was founded by Europeans. That said, a great historical paradox has willed that the United States be both the extension of Europe and also its negation. The first immigrants in the seventeenth century were victims of religious persecution in Europe and sought to turn their backs on it. In the nineteenth century, several new waves of immigrants were also fleeing Europe: Jews fleeing pogroms, Irish Catholics, German anarchists, and destitutes from across the continent answered the promise of the New World.

The author John Barth once said that 'every American is an orphan'. He should have been more specific and said a voluntary orphan, that is to say, a patricidal one. Most Americans see themselves as a product of a separation with their European past, free to chase the material happiness that, according to the Declaration of 1776, is a natural right of man. This pursuit of happiness in the materialistic sense of the word, of comfort and money, has engendered many sarcastic remarks in Europe, such as those of Kipling or Stendhal. However this conception of happiness is part of the baggage of the Enlightenment, and thus a part of European culture. Further, America is indebted to England for its language, of course, but also for the social importance attributed to contract, freedoms, and the balance of power, in short for the foundation of its economic and political model. It is easy to see that the American pretention to refuse their country's European legacy is excessive. That said, the split is undeniable.

PL: How did this split with Europe take place?

DV: It had already started when the first settlers arrived. The founders of New England were extremist Puritans fleeing Europe, Bible in hand. The split was further stimulated by the long trip across the Atlantic, which the puritans aboard the *Mayflower* compared to the Hebrews escaping Egypt in search of the promised land. In their identification with the peoples of the Bible, the pilgrims and their successors were convinced that America was the new promised land, a rich, wide open space, given by God to his favourite children. They claimed to their benefit that they were God's 'chosen people'.

The first arrivals were enthralled with this empty world that was offered to them like a blank page, though the term empty world was perhaps chosen a bit quickly. It pays little attention to the Indians who sparsely populated this territory, and who were victims of a shameless genocide. The French and Spanish, fellow Europeans with a common heritage, were also ousted. In 1853, the territory of the United States was definitively constituted. Besides Alaska and Hawaii, these borders have remained unchanged: a veritable El Dorado with wide open spaces, Great Plains of fertile soils, and lands rich in raw materials.

This wide-open space, rich and virgin, responded to the desires of those who wanted to found a new world free of the supposed perversions of old Europe. This is the opposite of the Greek and Roman colonisers' spirit of conquest in the ancient world, and of the European colonisers of the nineteenth century, who saw themselves as acting as an extension of their own heritage.

For the immigrants to this apparently virgin land, America was a paradise untouched by sin. It bore the mark of the Biblical God. The entire Transcendentalist current after Henry Thoreau, for whom the divine was manifest in nature, affirmed this belief. In these immaculate surroundings, it became possible to start the world over and to rewrite history, which had deviated from its course in Europe. It was the ambition of Winthrop's ^[7] Puritans, and of those aboard the *Mayflower*, to create a 'city upon a hill', after the precepts of Saint Matthew. This call was heard, as is proved by the abundance of communities founded by utopian religious sects, such as the Zion founded by the first Mormons, or the phalansteries founded by

Fourierists.^[8] Besides these utopian minorities, it is American society as a whole, especially after the Civil War, which claims to incarnate the perfect society that must impose itself upon the world.

PL: Isn't that what Max Weber said in his famous thesis published in 1920, entitled *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,^[9] in which he analysed the role of extreme Calvinism in the creation of the original American ideology?

DV: Max Weber offers an invaluable key to our understanding of the state of mind that created the United States of America. This German sociologist and philosopher makes it clear that the founding fathers of Calvinism were not social reformers. 'The salvation of the soul and that alone', he affirms 'was the centre of their life and work.'^[10] That said, he also notes that everywhere that Calvinism has popped up, there has been a strange combination of a keen business sense and great piety that dominates all aspects human life, particularly among the Quakers and Pietists. '[T]he New England colonies were founded by preachers and seminary graduates with the help of small bourgeois, craftsmen and yeomen [free peasants], for religious reasons.'^[11] Escaping England with irresistible energy, the Pilgrim Fathers claimed to be the founders of a new Zion, following Biblical scripture in the most literal sense, including the more bizarre passages. An unintended consequence was that their Calvinist ethic was instrumental in the formation of capitalism. The more riches one accumulates, the more he thinks he is pleasing God. 'Bourgeois' selfishness found itself legitimised by a religion that was never founded for this end to begin with. Max Weber cites a sermon where Benjamin Franklin innocently reveals an apology for avarice and utilitarianism: the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself, the goal of life. Honesty, says Franklin, is useful because it assures us our partner's credit. Virtues are justified by their utility. Maintaining a modest appearance allows one to obtain the approval of all. The ultimate goal is 'the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life... It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it

appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational.’^[12]

Weber adds, ‘[I]n the country of Benjamin Franklin’s birth (Massachusetts), the spirit of capitalism... was present before the capitalistic order.’^[13] The causal relationship here is a radical inversion of that posited by Marx’s historical materialism.

Economic systems do not determine representations and ideologies. Rather, representations (religious or ideological) are what determine the economic system. Carried along by their Biblical dreams, the puritans of the *Mayflower* and their successors identified with the Hebrews escaping Egypt in search of the promised land. They believed that they would found a perfect utopian world as willed by God. Thus they gave birth to the most complete form of capitalist society. Max Weber underlines that the Protestant ethic as defined by him, after having founded capitalism, no longer exists today. It is no longer necessary for the perpetuation of capitalism, since capitalism has since become a coherent, self-reproducing system. Max Weber’s study shows the unexpected way in which ‘ideas’ can become decisive historical forces.

PL: Do you think all Americans were united behind this messianic conceptualisation of the United States?

DV: Not all Americans, of course, but certainly those who made up the dominant part of society. It is impossible to ignore that one of the main intellectual reference points of the old conservative circles was the English philosopher Edmund Burke, who offered a pitiless critique of the metaphysics of human rights. Conversely, in *Common Sense*, published in 1776, the very same year as the American Revolution, Thomas Paine talks about ‘starting the world anew’. Thomas Jefferson, the primary writer of the Declaration of Independence, assures the reader that the United States represents the ‘world’s best hope’.^[14] Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed the same sentiment in very similar, though much less modest, terms. The United States, he asserts, is ‘the greatest favour God has ever granted to the world’. This idea was further developed in one of the foundational texts of American ideology, ‘Manifest Destiny’, published by John O’Sullivan in 1845 in order to justify expansion to the west. All the themes of American

exceptionalism are mentioned: the split with the European past, a new world in which anything is possible, the mission of the United States, the innocence of its people, the support of God, and also the revolutionary charge against European societies that are encumbered by their aesthetic and aristocratic heritage. O'Sullivan enumerates the values of his nation: equality, progress, brotherhood, universal emancipation, individual freedom, freedom of belief, and finally the freedom of the market and entrepreneurship.

Besides this freedom of market and entrepreneurship, it is safe to say that these intentions have been dented by their less than angelic results: Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, for example. That said, these principles are never doubted by the American people. They are taught as dogma. They are told that they are representatives of the Empire of Good, in a complete breakaway from the European spirit, which is seen as Evil, as expressed by Presidents Reagan and Bush Junior.

PL: The United States shut themselves out from the rest of the world for quite a long time, thanks to the great economic wealth of their immense territory. At what time did the messianic dream of worldwide expansion become manifest?

DV: Without ignoring American intervention in Japan in the nineteenth century, in China, and against Spanish colonies in Cuba and the Philippines, the true turning point was in 1917, when the United States entered the First World War on the side of the Entente against Germany. The pretext offered by President Wilson was the intense submarine war sparked off by Berlin, in addition to the Zimmermann affair. In a coded message intercepted by the English, the German foreign secretary offered an alliance to Mexico, offering to help it regain the lost territories of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. On 1 March 1917, Wilson made the document public, which provoked immense indignation and decisively turning public opinion, which had until then strongly opposed the war. On 2 April, Congress passed the decision to join the war against Germany and the Central Powers. Their lack of a significant army and navy meant that the military effects of this decision would not be truly felt until the following year.

A process was nevertheless set into motion, a process whose consequences would change the face of the world.

Woodrow Wilson was elected as President for the first time in 1912, thanks to the support of Wall Street banks. He was re-elected in 1916 on a platform supporting peace. He led the United States into war the following year under the pretext of a democratic crusade, that is to say for the capitalistic interests he represented. By 1913 he had passed the Federal Reserve Act, which created a central bank placed under the control of J P Morgan and connected to the London Rothschilds; Kuhn, Loeb and Co, which was the original World Bank of the time; and the National City Bank, the financial façade of the Rockefeller group. The goal was to make the United States the engine of economic globalisation, which meant the reorganisation of world geopolitics around Anglo-American finance.

The great majority of these financiers shared the same aversion towards Austro-German aristocrats, and their adversary, the Russian monarchy. Wilson's personal advisor and a well-known man in financial circles, Colonel House (a fake title, he was never a colonel), had expressed the dilemma facing the business sector on 22 August 1914: 'If the Allies win, it means the domination of Russia on the continent of Europe; and if Germany wins, it means the unspeakable tyranny of militarism for generations to come.'^[15] This was a problematic situation, but it was solved when the Russian revolutions of March and November 1917 took place. This took Russia out of the game decisively, and there was no longer any risk of seeing her sharing a victory with England, which would have led to a strengthening of the hated autocracy.

PL: We know quite well that American business circles were supportive of both Russian revolutions: the democratic one of February-March 1917, and the Bolshevik Revolution of October-November. You know this topic quite well because you wrote a book about the Russian Revolution and the civil war that ensued titled *The Whites and Reds*.^[16] Do you think that these revolutions were supported, as is sometimes proposed, by certain American Jewish banks?

DV: I am not the kind to give in to conspiracy theories. That said, just because obsessive conspiracy theorists exist, does not mean that there are never conspiracies. There is extant proof that many American bankers, notably Jacob Schiff, Kuhn, Loeb and Co, and even Paul Warburg, whose brother headed a Hamburg bank bearing the same name, had intervened financially in a significant way in support of the Russian revolutionaries. It was a way for them to get revenge on the Tsarist regime, which was known for its anti-Semitism. I certainly do not pretend that these interventions were decisive. They do not explain the state of distress in which Russia, its people, and its army had found themselves in 1917, nor does it explain the failure of Tsarist power and the effective manoeuvring of Lenin and his associates. It is still a fact that certain American high financiers held outlooks similar to those of the Russian revolutionaries.

PL: If we are to believe Samuel Huntington in the last essay published before his death, *Who Are We?*, Americans will eventually be confronted with unimagined challenges that may very well devastate the very foundation of their society. What are your thoughts on this?

DV: Having analysed threats against American national sentiment, Huntington held that the most pressing was the deconstruction of the White elites in government agencies, business circles, the media, intelligentsia, and education. He asserts that these elites have adopted a transnational and universalist vision that coincides with the economic and financial globalisation of the world. These transnationals constitute the nucleus of a global superclass: the 'cosmocrats'. Nevertheless, he notes that an active resistance of 'nativists' exists, mounting in the opposite direction. This resistance was demonstrated in a muffled manner during the Presidential election of 2008, in which Barack Obama took power as the first Black president of the United States.

PL: Have there been examples in the past of Americans that have distanced themselves from this Biblical messianism and avowed themselves united with Europe?

DV: The most famous one was that of the pilot Charles Lindbergh

(1902–1974), who became famous at 25, in 1927, for the first solo trans-Atlantic flight in history (New York-Paris, 6000 kilometres). Later, in 1932, he and his wife, the beautiful Anne Morrow, were faced with a completely different ordeal when their baby was kidnapped and murdered. Lindbergh always attributed this tragedy to the excess of fame attributed to him by the press, which led to his great disdain for fame. Tall, slim, very Scandinavian (his father was Swedish), he faced every hardship with a rare kind of firmness. The trials he faced in 1932 were not the last. Starting in 1939, well aware that the world risked facing another world war, Lindbergh mobilised himself at great risk against the hawkish politics of President Franklin Roosevelt and his immediate circles. He explained his reasons in the November 1939 issue of *Reader's Digest* with exemplary lucidity: 'We, the heirs of European culture, are on the verge of a disastrous war, a war within our own family of nations, a war which will reduce the strength and destroy the treasures of the White race, a war which may even lead to the end of our civilization [...] We can have peace and security only so long as we band together to preserve that most priceless possession, our inheritance of European blood, only so long as we guard ourselves against attack by foreign armies and dilution by foreign races.'

Lindbergh subscribed to the tradition of the American isolationists, who were hostile to any kind of intervention in foreign affairs. This opinion was shared by a great majority of Americans. A strong public opinion movement called 'America First' began to take shape. He served as their most famous spokesperson, which caused difficulties for Roosevelt. The President would never forgive him.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in early December 1941, Lindbergh ceased all political activism and enlisted to fight for his country. That said, due to a vindictive President, he was never officially allowed to join the Air Force as he had wished. It was in a hybrid status that he participated in the war against Japan in the most active and dangerous way, revealing his extraordinary aptitudes as an aeronautic engineer and a war pilot. That said, he never lost his better judgement, privately registering his indignation for the numerous war

crimes he witnessed committed by Americans against the Japanese.

For the sake of completeness, however, we must remember that Charles Lindbergh was an inventive and idealistic spirit, very closely linked to Dr Alexis Carrel^[17] when the latter worked at the Rockefeller Institute. He revealed himself to be quite adept at medical engineering and in organ preservation techniques. After the Second World War, in tandem with his work, he dedicated his energy to the protection of the natural world within the World Wildlife Federation, worrying quite rightly about the catastrophic effects of excessive economic and technical growth.^[18]

PL: After this long digression, let's get back to Europe. Do you think it is possible to make an analogy between the European experience after 1945 and what took place in Asia, most notably in China, after the very long century starting at about the time of the Opium Wars?

DV: In spite of all the differences, taking a look at China is an interesting way of stepping back and looking at the fate of Europe following the Second World War. China's civilisation spanned thousands of years and easily rivaled Europe's. She too had known many historical divisions and invasions, all of which she triumphed, always coming back to herself. Like you said, however, everything changed following the Opium Wars, especially after the extreme incident that was the conquest of Peking and the sacking of the Summer Palace by a Franco-British expeditionary force. The result was that China now had to open its ports to foreign commerce under the influence of the West without being able to oppose it. The trauma was immense. For the first time in her long history, China doubted both herself and her civilisation. New generations were convinced that tradition was the cause of this downfall. In order to modernise and regain her strength, they had to get rid of their ancestral values and adopt those of the West, Communism included. This was the origin of a chain reaction of revolutions that led to the bloody delirium of Maoism. After all of this, under Deng Xiaoping, shaken by the retreat of the USSR, and influenced by the Japanese example, and more significantly by that of Singapore, China — that is to say, those who

led her — decided to follow their own path. She took the recipe for economic liberalism from the American West, but maintained an authoritarian political system making it, in essence, a return to Confucianism. Proportionally speaking, since the Second World War, Europe has unwittingly undergone a trauma completely analogous to that faced by China at the end of the nineteenth century. We have lost faith in our own values, which we no longer even know. We copy the American model, even as we criticise it, lacking the freedom to imagine a truly European future.

PL: Do you think the day will come when Europeans will escape the American model in their quest for modernity?

DV: Victims of our lack of identitarian memory, we have stayed at the most primitive stage of the quest for efficiency. When we analyse downfall we can only do so in terms of political, technical, or structural failure. This will end, however. Faced with great hardships to come, we will have no choice but to call upon our spiritual hearth, that hearth from which the primordial impulsion of our civilisation once surged several millennia ago, and which has continued to animate its best parts. For the European to steep himself in Homeric thinking, Confucian for the Chinese, Muhammadan for the Muslim, Mosaic or Buddhist for others, is to be reborn thanks to the models that have nourished our respective civilisations. It is not a step backwards. It serves to update the living principles of an ideal. It is up to us to make the effort by freeing our foundational poems from the libraries where academic culture has sterilised and locked them away!

PL: Do you think it is actually possible to create another conception of life, and that answers will come from it?

DV: In fact I do. We are in possession of a spiritual heritage that has nothing to envy in those of other great civilisations, but we are unaware and misinformed about it. To this massive spiritual crisis of Western nihilism, we must provide our own answers. Men exist only by what distinguishes them: clan, lineage, history, culture, tradition. There are no universal answers to the questions of existence and behaviour. Every civilisation has its truths and its gods, all respectable so long as they do not threaten our existence. Every civilisation

creates its own answers, without which the individual, man or woman, lacking identity and archetypes, is thrown into a world of chaos. Like plants, men cannot exist without roots. Every individual must discover his own.

- [1] Robert Baden-Powell (1857–1941), a Lieutenant-General in the British Army, wrote several books on the subject of scouting which became bestsellers, and established experimental camps of his own in 1907 through which he formed the basis for the scouts movement worldwide, which quickly became immensely popular.—Ed.
- [2] Sometimes referred to as the ‘Vienna System of International Relations’, or the ‘Congress System’.—Tr.
- [3] Not Latin in the original, meaning ‘law of nations’.—Tr.
- [4] Adam Smith (1723–1790) was a Scottish economist who helped to lay the foundation for modern-day capitalism. He advanced the idea that individual self-interest was ultimately good for all of society.—Ed.
- [5] Latin in the original, meaning ‘economic man’.—Tr.
- [6] Venner seems to be referring to a comment that was made by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who once said, ‘I believe that none should live in France without respecting our culture and values. Those who wish to oppress their wives, practice polygamy, impose female circumcision and forced marriages on their daughters, impose the law of older brothers upon their sisters...’ The ‘big brothers’ he is referring to seem to be those who police their own neighbourhoods in the immigrant ghettos in accordance with Islamic law, and who are often involved in clashes with the police during riots.—Ed.
- [7] John Winthrop (1587–1649) was an English Puritan leader who led the first large-scale Puritan expedition to the New World, founding the Massachusetts Bay Colony and serving as its governor.—Ed.
- [8] A phalanstery was a structure devised by the nineteenth-century French utopian socialist Charles Fourier to house a small community of people who would work purely for the benefit of the community. Fourier believed that these communities would eliminate social inequality of all kinds.—Ed.
- [9] *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2012).—Ed.
- [10] Ibid., pp. 89–90.—Ed.
- [11] Ibid., p. 56.—Ed.
- [12] Ibid., p. 53.—Ed.
- [13] Ibid., p. 55.—Ed.
- [14] Jefferson made this statement in his first inaugural address upon becoming President in 1801.—Ed.
- [15] Charles Seymour (ed.), *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2005).
- [16] *Les Blancs et les Rouges* (Paris: Pygmalion Gérard watelet, 1997).—Ed.
- [17] Alexis Carrel (1873–1944) was a French surgeon and biologist who believed in the possibility of improving humanity through eugenics. He was part of a French organisation which oversaw the implementation of eugenics policies in occupied France during the Second World War.—Ed.
- [18] Bernard Marck, *Lindbergh, l’ange noir* (Paris: Archipel, 2006).

8. Europe's Shattered Memory

PAULINE LECOMTE: As a historian, your work has focused on more than just our modern period. You have often written about how peoples and societies evolve over time, notably in *History and Traditions of Europeans: 30,000 Years of Identity*. What was your intention in writing this book?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: My stated intention was to lay the groundwork for a reformation through the discovery of our origins. To that end I set about describing the transnational history of the European people since prehistory in considerable detail. I gave my commentary on the poems of Homer, and demonstrated their impact on both ancient philosophy and the European spirit as it exists beyond all temporal splits. I meditated on Alexander and the eastern Hellenes, on Rome in both its grandeur and its decadence, as well as on the Constantinian Revolution.^[1] I also paid particular attention to later renaissances, such as Charlemagne's Franks, the Celtic Middle Ages, and eventually the one in which we would eventually return to our ancient origins. I was, of course, already familiar with these topics, as historical reflection has always been a part of my life.

PL: That said, the book presents a new synthesis of that material. What was the impetus behind it?

DV: This book about history and tradition was written as I overcame a great suffering caused by the degradation and blame imposed upon Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. I never stopped contemplating its causes or considering possible solutions. *History and Traditions* was a result of those reflections. It is certainly not by luck that its creation coincided with a major historical split, of which it is a sort of echo. The world has entered into a new era, that of the collapse of universalism. The religion of Humanity has been weakened by the emergence of peoples and cultures that refuse the hegemonic pretention of the West. In addition to this, there has been a general weakening of the dogmas imposed by the two major powers that partitioned Europe at Yalta. This weakening was a result

of the fall of Communism and the revelation that America may not be the 'Empire of Good', but the empire of cynicism and lies. One can clearly see the signs that guilt-ridden attitudes towards European history are fading. The fact that this immoral system of economic predation needs to criminalise our past in order to maintain its pretention to purity has become all too obvious. To put it simply, this cynical system frequently tells us in Europe that, 'though we may not be perfect, compared to the horrors perpetuated by your ancestors, at least we have morality on our side...'

PL: You invoke 'European tradition', but the way in which you use the term 'tradition' is in fact rather unusual. What does tradition mean to you?

DV: My conception of tradition is new. It defines my interpretation of history and of the future of Europe. It can also be applied to other peoples. It begins with the observation that the conventionally accepted history of European civilisation is an illusion, behind which exists a genuine secret history made up of hidden permanencies. Tradition is the expression of these permanencies.

PL: How did you come up with this conception of tradition?

DV: It never would have come to be without the unprecedented hardships imposed upon the European people throughout the twentieth century. It was born of a new awareness of identity that our predecessors, who still lived within a relatively organised world, would have had difficulty imagining. Fooled by universalist indoctrination, we believe that all men are identical to each other. This is the illusion held by the young European woman depicted in Amélie Nothomb's autobiographical film and novel, *Stupeur et Tremblements*.^[2] This young European woman has a sincere love for Japan and seeks to integrate herself into Japanese society while still maintaining her European sensitivities, prejudices, and social behaviours. She painfully discovers that this is impossible. She is fundamentally different. All her attempts to manifest her European generosity and enthusiasm lead to catastrophe. The implicit lesson is that we exist only by that which distinguishes us and by what is unique to us: clan, lineage, history, culture, and tradition, all of which

are things we need as much as oxygen in order to truly be alive.

PL: When we hear the word 'tradition', we tend to imagine the past, nostalgia...

DV: The way I see it, tradition is the exact opposite. It is not the past, it is that which does not pass away. It comes to us from that which is most distant, but always present. It is our interior compass, the benchmark of all the norms that suit us and that have survived all that has tried to change us. Look at the role of women, for example, or more specifically, of the female body. Since being confronted with a completely different tradition following the influx of North African immigrants onto our continent, we have discovered that the visibility of women in our society is unique. In the Islamic tradition, such visibility is considered scandalous. It is most interesting, however, to observe the constancy of this European peculiarity across time. Despite the age-old suspicion against women perpetuated by the Bible and the Church, casting them as a perennial sexual temptress, a being of sin, Europeans have stubbornly stuck to their guns. From the north to the south of Europe, women have been ubiquitous in European society throughout the Christian Middle Ages. This is substantiated by history, literature, and iconography. The ancient nude even made a strong comeback in the sixteenth century. Despite the Reformation, a great number of nude sculptures were produced by Botticelli, Cranach, and many others which nevertheless retained an air of modesty about them. Despite threats of moral reprimand, the social respect for femininity and the praise given to sensual love were not lost. Further proof of this is found in the literary outburst of tales of courtly love, which started in the twelfth century. You could say that the history of European behaviours is like an underground river that, despite being invisible, is very real. It is the subterranean river of tradition.

PL: How can we rediscover our fading tradition?

DV: By opening our eyes, and by using the effort of our imagination in order to make ourselves conscious of the things that are hidden from us. To recycle the example of women in society, Europeans have always held the idea of a polarised, yet reciprocal, relationship between the sexes. Venus and Mars, Penelope and

Odysseus, the lady and the knight. We grow in relation to each other. This naturally experienced ideal is not found in the Qu'ran, nor in Buddhism, nor even in the works of the Asian sages. These honoured sexuality and the family group, as expertly illustrated by the character of the young Phuong and her sister in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*.^[3] That said, these cultures, worthy of respect in themselves, ignore the European conception of the couple as comprising two autonomous people, a man and a woman, who choose to unite out of love. This romantic ideal is, of course, already present in Homer.

PL: What gives tradition permanence?

DV: If a tradition survives over time, it is because it rests upon the hereditary dispositions of related peoples, and a spiritual heritage whose origin reaches back into prehistory, through the long and mysterious period that led to the emergence of the Indo-Europeans. Saying *30,000 Years of European Identity* is a deliberate act of provocation that nevertheless highlights a true fact. This long stretch of time includes the impressive painted cave culture that spanned from the Pyrenees to the Urals, and which exists nowhere else in the world. The aesthetic perfection of this primitive culture is quite moving. One can feel that there is already an inkling of our spirit in it. There seems to be a cosmic religiousness about it, the sense of harmony between man, animal, and nature, of the same sort we find in Greek myth and philosophy, Medieval statuary, the Arthurian cycle, romantic poetry, and even our current ecological aspirations.

PL: Is it possible to summarise the contribution of this conception of perennial tradition as being unique to a civilisation?

DV: Faced with all the things that threaten our identity and our survival as Europeans, we have lost the safeguard of an identitarian religion. There is little we can do about this. However, we possess a very rich identitarian memory. It is up to us to rediscover, cultivate, and to create a metaphysical memory of it, one that structures and responds to the confusion of our age.

PL: Is this appeal to memory divided?

DV: More than you would think. I would like to cite as an example a recent essay that answers your question in multiple ways by

showing to what degree European history is made up of divisions and continuities. This would be Pierre Manent's *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*.^[4] Manent is both a professor of political philosophy and a historian. He demonstrates that political forms conceived by Europeans have their origins in antiquity. He examines these forms philosophically, sorting out the immense mass of events and situations in order to find the general conceptual points. As is always the case, when philosophical reflection is conducted well, the analysis becomes exceedingly clear and enticing. However, it also exposes it to criticism from strictly historical circles, which sometimes jostle the imposing panorama provided by the thesis.

PL: What is the author's thesis?

DV: 'My thesis' writes Manent, 'is that the [Greek] city-state is the first source of Western development. Before its invention, men lived by the relatively fixed order of the family unit, which is still important in many parts of the world. With the city-state, humanity is introduced to a new element of politics as government of the commonplace, and the history of the West thus becomes that of its four major political forms: the city-state, the empire, the church, and the nation.' The succession of these four systems — the city-state, the empire, the church, and the nation — as described by Manent is debatable, but it shows very clearly that the modern nation, the ultimate political form, has self-destructed following the bloody excesses of the century of 1914. It has left a void that is certainly not filled by the undetermined political structure we call the European Union.

PL: The Church's principle vocation has never been temporal. How then did it become a political power?

DV: The history behind that shift is immense and wrought with unforeseen events. We know that towards the end of the fourth century, following circumstances unimaginable to her founders, Jesus and Paul the Apostle, that the Church became the official compulsory religion of a decadent Roman Empire by official decree, an Empire whose ethnic centre of gravity had shifted towards the Semitic East and North Africa. This did not happen overnight, of course. It took

three centuries, about the same amount of time that separates us from the end of the reign of Louis XIV... The small, dissident Jewish sect had become open to all when Paul allowed non-Jews (Gentiles) to join this religion, which claimed to represent all of mankind.

This universalist project overlapped with the universal ambition of Imperial Rome. In fact, it even seemed to imitate it, which of course favoured its adoption as the imperial religion after a number of conflicts and heresies. For an empire with a global vocation, a religion that claimed to represent all men was more convenient than the religion of the Italic city-state's indigenous gods. Everyone seemed in favour of this new religion, however, and Christian apologists spared no quarter in emphasising this fact. Unlike the ancient civic religion, this one was individualistic. Every Christian was in a personal relationship with God via prayer, which never directly conflicted with the universal aspirations of the Empire. Everyone knows the saying, 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's'. In principle, the spheres of God and of Caesar were well separated. The voice of Saint Paul proclaimed that the nascent Church itself had justified Caesar's authority: 'For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God' (Romans 13:1). Besides recommending submission to established power, the new religion was mute in political matters. In this regard, the Empire could not ask for anything better: a religion ready to serve it by unifying its peoples and races in their adoration of a God that excluded all others. From this God, it could claim its legitimacy by making his worship obligatory.

PL: Imagining the consequences is dizzying...

DV: It is difficult to keep track of them all. The decision made by Constantine and upheld by his successors, save for Julian, had immense and unexpected effects on the future of Europe. The adoption of Christianity, for example, introduced the West to Jewish and Biblical tradition, which until then had been completely alien. In addition to this, it introduced the mortal conflict between Jewish and Christian memory, which brought with it the accusation of deicide that fed the historical disaster that became anti-Semitism (anti-Judaism), and which eventually led to the moral condemnation of

Europe.

PL: Did this new religion have the same effect in the West as it did in the East?

DV: Good question! It is quite clear that the new religion had been imposed as the Western Empire began to fall into decline (it collapsed decisively in 476). *A contrario*,^[5] the Empire remained standing in the East for another ten centuries, up until the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453. The consequences of the Empire's partition deeply affected European history as well as that of the Church. In the East, the latter remained subject to the spiritual and temporal authority of the Emperor. From this came the Caesaropapism of Byzantium and the autocephalic Orthodox denominations. Conversely, in the West, the dissolution of Imperial authority allowed new political forms to take shape.

When the Imperial hierarchy fell in the West at the end of the fifth century, the Church ceased to monopolise religious power. For close to a century, it also held the crux of administrative and territorial power. Theodosius^[6] decided (in the edicts of 392) that the Imperial administration was to be exclusively Christian. This is, of course, very much in line with the logic of a state religion conceived by the Church, because there was a risk of attracting opportunists. At the same time, Gaul, Germany, and Insular Britain (what later became England) had all been Romanised, and bishops (often laymen) now held the majority of the power, with the exception of the military and political spheres. In Gaul, the power of sovereignty was taken by Clovis^[7] who, though already very powerful militarily, had made a pact with the Gaulish episcopate, made possible by his conversion. The example provided by Clovis was copied all across the 'barbarian' kingdoms of the West. It was a way for them to access the prestige of ancient Rome incarnated by the Pope and, starting with Charlemagne, the Emperor.

Before the foundation of the new Western Empire by Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire by Otto the Great, the Church had become the incongruous inheritor of Roman power and splendour, outlawing opposition from the ancient religious cults. From

this inheritance came, among other things, the symbolic choice of Rome as the seat of the papacy, which enjoyed colossal riches. The decision of who was to inherit Rome's political power, however, was ceaselessly disputed between the Pope, the Emperor, and the rulers of smaller kingdoms who, imitating Philip the Fair (in France) and Henry VIII (in England), claimed to be the 'emperors of their kingdom'.

PL: This must mean that the conflicts were incessant...

DV: More than you can imagine. For an immense period lasting about ten centuries, Europeans were torn between the ancient city-states, the Holy Empire, and the Church itself. The latter enjoyed spiritual power (monopolising speech and the power of excommunication), but it wanted more. This was the source of all conflicts between the Pope and the Emperor. This also caused a huge tearing apart of minds from which Europe has never fully recovered. It was 'an appalling mess', explains Pierre Manent, 'a conflict between authority and loyalty', a conflict of words and actions.

This thought is at the centre of Manent's study. 'Christianity,' he remarks, 'introduced an unprecedented distance between what men did and what they said.' Why? Because 'Christian teaching demands that men love what they naturally hate — their enemies — and that they hate what they naturally love — themselves'. A lengthy expansion is therefore established as a commentary to *City of God*, a polemic against the 'pagans' written by Saint Augustine at the end of the fifth century. We are well aware of the central argument: 'Two loves have formed two cities: the love of self, reaching even to contempt of God, an earthly city; and the love of God, reaching even to contempt of self, a heavenly one.'^[8] This seminal text gave the faithful a model of the City of God so that they would turn their backs on the sins and seduction of the earthly city of pagan delights. His influence was immense, leading to disruptive effects in periods when Christian speech enjoyed absolute authority.

PL: Would you say that there was a conflict between words and actions?

DV: Indeed. For a long time the demoralising conflict between words and actions, the contradiction between what men said and what

they did, pressed upon the European soul. Thanks, however, to the upheaval brought about by the Italian Renaissance, Machiavelli gave birth to a liberating stream of ideas. He was the first theoretician to pave the way for political action free of 'moral' pretence. Though not looking to negate the distinction between good and evil, he taught that in politics, one must separate oneself from morality, because it is completely unrelated to the realm of politics. Thus, by overcoming the conflict between 'moral' teaching and necessary action, Machiavelli created modern politics. He was a herald of the modern state, the state that takes power, 'by producing a commandment independent of outside opinion, especially that of a religious nature, a commandment that authorises or interdicts opinions based on sovereign decision'.

PL: This way of looking at things echoes the classic definition of secularism, that is to say the separation between the political and the religious, does it not?

DV: Even though the fathers of secularism were unaware of it, with the exception, perhaps, of Voltaire, it should be made clear that secularism does not mean the separation of politics and all 'religion', but the separation of politics and 'monotheistic religion'. The difference being that the latter introduced moral commandments that were ignored by the polytheistic religions of antiquity. These ancient religions contented themselves with celebrating the various deities of their city-state's pantheon. This kept each citizen firmly rooted in his ethnic group (today we would use the term nation). These religions made no pretence of being privy to a transcendental 'truth' and imposed no 'morality' from on high. Natural morals (do not kill, do not steal, honour your father and mother, respect your neighbour's wife, etc.) were taught through tradition. Everything changed with the introduction of Hebraic monotheism, which tore morality out of the hands of tradition and put it into those of a divine arbiter who threatened grievous punishment in the afterlife to those who broke his rules. This new 'morality', according to Manent, through its often perplexing interdictions, introduced a conflict between 'what men do and what they say'. If we take the notion of secularism in the current sense of the word, the separation of politics from the 'monotheistic

religion', it may appear as though there has been an implicit return to the freedom of ancient polytheism, without the pantheon of gods.

PL: Now that is an original interpretation! It does little to answer the anxiety of our time. Human life cannot exist without a voice of authority. Where, then, does the modern state, the secular state, the neutral state, find a pertinent political voice?

DV: Unlike the Europe we live in today, muzzled with interdictions and guilt, our Greek 'ancestors' of the ancient world, inventors of the city-state, lived in agreement with themselves and in an environment of mental freedom that, at least before Plato's moralising, which sought to ban poets from his Republic, did not lock them up with restrictions! This fundamental difference with our current era might explain why Europeans today, who are not less active or inventive than those of the past, are for the moment deprived of the freedom to imagine their future beyond the worn-out system they live in. But those of us who can see historical context know that it is only a matter of time. The time will come when Europeans will return to themselves, finding the strength to repudiate the humanitarian religion and all the associated clutter. The failure of the system will give way to the awakening of an identitarian consciousness, a fact that is observable even as I write.

This in itself will constitute an immense revolution that will have to find its own political translation, less by the formal transformation of institutions than by that of mentalities, which is ambitious in its own right. Through writing too, as a preamble to reform, we can transmit the principles of identity and liberty that were shared by the ancient Greek city-states. Remember that these city-states were founded upon the ethnic homogeneity of their citizens. Remember too that their fate, like that of all states, was dependent upon the quality of the leading class. As the saying goes: 'When the nobility exhibits good conduct, the country thrives.' This implies that the noble class distinguishes itself first and foremost by the acceptance of a higher duty, which is characteristic of all authentic aristocracy founded not on birth, but on merit and a concern for excellence. That will be, once again, an immense revolution of ideas and education. The hardest one.

This has nothing to do with pious wishes, but of being conscious of what is necessary and possible, and which colours all the rebellious reflections of this handbook.

- [1] Venner's own term for the opening of the Roman Empire to Christianity under the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine I.—Ed.
- [2] *Fear and Trembling* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2001). The film version was released in France in 2003.—Ed.
- [3] *The Quiet American* (London: Heinemann, 1955). The novel is about a British journalist covering the French war in Vietnam who ends up battling for the affections of a Vietnamese woman with an American CIA agent.—Ed.
- [4] *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- [5] Latin: 'on the contrary'.—Ed.
- [6] Theodosius I (347–395) was the Emperor of Rome from 379 until his death. He was also the last Emperor to rule over both halves of the Empire.—Ed.
- [7] Clovis I (c. 466-c. 511) was the first Frankish king to unite all of the tribes under one rule. He converted to Christianity in 496, and most of the Franks followed suit.—Ed.
- [8] *The City of God*, Book 24, Chapter 28.—Ed.

9. The Shock of History and Ideas

PAULINE LECOMTE: In many of your essays, you emphasise that modern thought seems to lack inspiration, and that no one really has anything to say anymore, and instead we tirelessly repeat the same old, self-evident truths. Do you think that history can fix the broken state of modern thought?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: I believe it can, and I have endeavoured to prove it. Understanding the origin of the strange world in which we live has been a main effort of mine, one that stimulates and renews the depth of my reflection. It is the result of my historical work.

PL: In *The Century of 1914*, you criticise an idiosyncrasy often committed by philosophers and intellectuals, in which they become rabid defenders of lying, chimeric, and backwards systems. What do you think is the origin of this idiosyncrasy?

DV: It is simply a natural result of the human spirit, the European spirit more specifically. This spirit creates endless abstractions: God, the Motherland, the Revolution, Humanity, Fortune, Socialism. These are all absolutes for whom, in heated collective and historical situations, men have killed and died. This is not the result of some mental pathology. Quite the contrary, it is the result of normal human behaviour. Unlike other mammals, man needs to give his life meaning. He needs something more than his daily rice or bread to sustain him. He exists solely through his representations of himself, of existence and its purpose. These representations vary with the cultures, beliefs, and eras that create them. Only their necessity is universal. That said, the intensity of this need for representations varies wildly between individuals. While the European everyman of the thirteenth century, lord or shepherd, was satisfied with a rudimentary belief in a tutelary God, the clergy's very existence was driven by theological reflection. The same is true of the secular theologians we have today in the form of political scholars. If we rule out pretenders and opportunists, sincere political scholars live for their ideas, ideas that they want more than anything to become absolutes, since these are the only

lenses through which they can perceive the world.

PL: What is the source of the tendency towards political extremism among intellectuals?

DV: We must take the hysteria peculiar to nervous personality types, especially in periods of collective violence and excitement, into consideration. We must also consider the fascination with power and strength that enthralls so many philosophers and writers. Plato's difficulties in Sicily,^[1] or the temptations of Bertrand Russell, André Malraux, and Carl Schmitt^[2] come to mind. Before and after Jean-Paul Sartre, countless intellectuals have come and gone, on the Left and the Right, who were obstinately mistaken and who in turn fooled their audience! If we ignore the deceitful and focus solely on those who are sincere, what is the root of their inclination towards extremism? Before we can grasp the crux of the issue, we must consider an ancillary reason for this: the intellectual expresses himself most often by way of the written word, with nothing but the blank page as an interlocutor. This makes the temptation to yield before the intoxication of violence stronger than it would be in a face-to-face confrontation. The furore of the pen was customary in the political journalism of the Third French Republic. Charles Maurras made it his specialty. The effects of temperament cannot be ignored either. Maurras himself was a man of uncompromising character that could be stopped by nothing, not even the perspective provided by a death sentence, as he demonstrated before the purge trials of 1945.

PL: That's violence on the soapbox or by the pen, which has circumstantial explanations. The real question concerns the frequent temptation posed by radicalisation among intellectuals

DV: Contrary to the man of action, who thinks and acts in concrete terms, the intellectual is unable to conceive of politics outside of his prism of abstraction and the purity of concepts. This is a psychological trait peculiar to intellectuals, who are heirs of Plato's dialectic, a stream of thinking from which, despite Nietzsche, the West has never quite freed itself. The intellectual is imbued to his very core by the certainty that concepts are the only true facts, and that he is their enlightened interpreter, while the commoner, as in Plato's allegory of

the cave, can only discern the half-deformed shadows they cast. Decisive, authoritative, and positive that he holds the keys of knowledge, the intellectual is unable to understand that Plato's parable is most applicable to him. Seeing things only through the abstraction of his concepts, he is the blind man in the cavern, and he is completely unaware of it.

PL: Where does this tendency towards unreality among intellectuals originate from?

DV: It originates from a characteristic of the European spirit that is both its greatest asset and its most damning flaw. Creations of the European spirit are unlimited to the extent that they sometimes negate themselves to the point of self-destruction, brought about by a decisive whirlwind of nihilism. The European spirit ignores the moderation which was a rule among the ancient Greeks, at least before Plato. Apollo against Prometheus, in a manner of speaking. At that time, before the fifth century, a number of Greek philosophers and mathematicians endeavoured to learn about nature (*phusis*) using their reason alone. This is what the Neoplatonist Proclus attempted to explain in his writings on the originality of Greek geometry from Thales to Euclid. He sought to compare it to the empirical precedents provided by Egyptian surveyors. He demonstrated that Greek geometry is purely rational. His exposition of Pythagorean science characterises what would eventually become European reason: 'Pythagoras transformed this study into the form of a liberal education, examining its principles from the beginning and tracking down the theorems, immaterially and intellectually.'^[3] This method gave birth to European science, which does not reduce itself to empirical measures, but goes back to the origins of the reasoning in order to base itself on hypotheses. It formulates theorems, that is to say, propositions through which it establishes truth using logical reasoning based on axioms. Finally, it implements a method utilising a detailed and progressive procedure in order to come to the sought-after conclusion. This knowledge does not call upon anything immediately experienced, but rather a purely abstract and intellectual process.

Every mathematical and physical discovery of modern science has proceeded using this method, this instinct towards the unlimited no longer held back by the moderation of the Greeks. This kind of reasoning was adopted by Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz; awaiting the biological discoveries of Buffon, Linné, Lamarck, and Darwin; the chemical discoveries of Lavoisier; the genetic discoveries made by Mendel and de Vries; up to the more recent mathematical discoveries of Poincaré, Einstein, Planck, and Heisenberg. Things becomes problematic and sometimes even catastrophic when this mathematical method is extended into the human domains of politics or history. The domain of humanity is that of experience, empiricism, and psychology, not of mathematical abstractions.

PL: So what you are suggesting is that, in trying to establish inviolable principles based on reason for their city-state, Plato and his disciples ended up actually creating general abstract concepts that were often incorrect?

DV: It is difficult to think without falling back on concepts. That said, concepts are just symbols, abstractions propelled by words. They refer to a class of things retaining similar characteristics. As useful as they are, these tools tend to reduce and simplify. The complex diversity of the real world finds itself erased before the enticing abstraction of the conceptual. After Plato and Aristotle, medieval scholars, and eventually Kant, tried to identify the structure and language of reality. In their school, Western intellectuals, particularly those from France with a sensibility for geometry, have passed on the belief that words (concepts) are mirror images of reality. They posit that theory is infinitely superior to both reality and experience.

Without a doubt, this is how every great metaphysical abstraction and political utopia functions. The Western intellectual knows, or rather thinks he knows, what others do not. He rarely considers reality as such, by the observation of events, experience, and induction, all of which he would consider contemptible. He thinks in reference to concepts and abstract models. The reasoning does not start with the observation of events, but with the invocation of a formula or a

theoretical concept issued by a theoretician whom he considers an authority. His reasoning opens with the statement of a concept or a quote from a renowned author, after which events are not examined in themselves, but in relation to their compatibility with his chosen concept.

This has been the appeal to the universal ever since the time of Plato. The philosopher of essence exposed himself to the sarcasm of the cynics, the predecessors of the nominalists: ‘I see a horse, not horseness’, contended Antisthenes,^[4] an argument later echoed by Joseph de Maistre:^[5] ‘I see humans, not humanity’. I see men, in all their differences, I do not see Man, the unknowable abstraction.

Observing the distortion of reason through abstraction in a mentally agile intellectual’s discourse is both fascinating and frightening. The instant he ties his reasoning to an uncertain assumption, the argument is over.

The great philosopher Pierre Hadot^[6] once ironically remarked, drawing from his experience as a youth in the STO^[7] as a metal worker, that unlike metal work, one can cheat with ideas. Ideas are malleable, which predisposes them to fraud and illusion.

The tendency towards radicalism among intellectuals finds at least one of its explanations in the seductive power of the conceptual abstraction and trussed-up reason. Abstraction makes everything simple and absolute, particularly when this is compounded with the brittle intoxication of rhetoric. The intellectual, whether he is liberal or ‘totalitarian’, likes listening to himself talk. He wraps himself in an exhilarating cloak of knowledge and purity. It always harkens back to Plato and his *Republic*, the pontificating schoolmaster who condemns Homer, and even poetry itself, as immoral.

PL: Do you think there is an antidote for this kind of abstraction?

DV: When it comes to the lives, politics, ethics, and religions of men, the empirical world rejected by Plato makes for a good antidote, that is to say the observation of events and historical experience in the broadest, the most neutral, and the most objective way. The history of facts, of men, and of events corrects the often deforming interpretations of the ‘long term’ view. We know that history can

escape neither subjectivity nor systematisation, as has been shown by Karl Marx and his successors' usage of the term. This is why I allude to real, objective history, assisted by the critical observation of the senses and by comparisons in space and time, similar to Edmund Burke's study of the French Revolution in which he compared it to the English Revolution of the preceding century, making clear the significant differences between the two.

The philosopher's job is to create tools for reflection, again, provided that these do not fall into the pit of abstraction. From this angle, the history of philosophy makes an excellent antidote. But philosophers who are also historians, like Lucien Jerphagnon, are quite rare. The historical study of philosophy involves examining ideas within, and understanding them in relation to, the period that produced them. In this framework it becomes clear that Plato's thinking was born in a mind gifted with the power of abstraction and fascinated by geometry. Moreover, it emerged in Athens in a period of anxiety and decline following the Peloponnesian Wars, which left a mark on Socrates. Ignoring this historical reality leaves one open to misunderstanding Plato's immense effort in trying to create a new city-state founded on unquestionable 'truths', established and proven by reason. Contrary to the sophists who confined themselves to Plato's proverbial cavern, he believed that the sensory world was a deceptive copy of the world of pure forms, of essence, and of ideas, and that it was up to him to discover and imagine it... an admirable effort, but the consequences and distortions that resulted were severe.

PL: As a historian who is attentive to the reality of historical events, how would you criticise the approach of modern historical theorists?

DV: I do not criticise the kind of intellectual work that extracts general lessons from historical observation. I would say it is perfectly legitimate to state, for example, that in French history there exists a relation between the threat of outside invasion due to poorly defined borders, and the formation of a state capable of maintaining a permanent army. The inverse of this can be said about England. The natural defence provided by the ocean resulted in a lessened need for

a professional army, thus there was no need to create a state in the French mould.

On the other hand, I would criticise the kind of theories in vogue in Marx and Spengler's time, the kind that rejected man's freedom to decide his destiny. According to these theories, men and societies are imprisoned in a cluster of never-ending links threaded together by multiple conditions: the unconscious, economic pressures, or the 'vegetal' cycle of cultures that span from their birth to their ultimate decline. No one will contest the reality of powerful determinisms throughout history. It is very clear, for example, that the success of the Reformation was dependent on northeastern Europe's distance from, and frequent resistance to, Roman influence. Is that to say that the Reformation was fated to happen, and that no other causes ought to be taken into account? Certainly not.

PL: In other words, you believe that the idea of a single determinism being used to explain significant historical movements and evolutions no longer holds weight.

DV: The principle of causality uses antecedents to explain phenomena. But when a single cause can result in any number of effects, this explanation loses its weight. The faith in unique causality that was so strong at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was destroyed by the collapse of the great ideologies of the time, and the deepening of historical reflection. In fact, when a multiplicity of determinants becomes manifest, freedom can once again be exercised. Only the most superficial examination of the past gives the sensation of the inevitable. If you look at the French Revolution, for example, the succession of events seems to impose itself as though it was fated to be. This is to forget that this succession was not a necessity and that other variables were possible. At the time of Louis XV and XVI, other European sovereigns that we have come to call the 'enlightened despots', Frederick II in Prussia and Catherine II in Russia, were able to control situations just as difficult as the one in France. Unfortunately, Louis XVI was far from an 'enlightened despot'. Much like Nicholas II of pre-revolutionary Russia, he was a very honest man, hesitant and erratic in his decisions, who had no real

disposition towards governing in periods of difficulty. That said, we need not fall back on a theory to know that some men are better at certain tasks than others.

PL: Why is it that historians forget that these successions are not necessities?

DV: When it occurs, this forgetfulness is usually caused by a lack of perspective, a result of written history or history examined backwards starting with the end. If we adopt a method that starts from the beginning, everything changes. We discover that the field of possibilities remains open.

PL: Your works on the history of Russia, Germany, Italy, the US, and France all start at the beginning, beginnings to which you accord a far greater place than most historians. In addition to this, you have suggested the use of alternate history for a kind of intellectual hygiene. What exactly do you mean?

DV: Alternate history is simply history with 'what ifs': what if Napoleon had won at Waterloo? What if Constantine had been defeated by Maxentius at Milvian Bridge in 312? What if Martin Luther had been slain by bandits on his way to Rome in 1510? Thinking in this way allows us to understand that the causes generally invoked for great historical events are not always historical necessities. Louis XIV, for example, would certainly not have marked French and European history in the same way had he been born with the temperament of his descendent, Louis XVI. The twentieth century historian would be the first to admit that things would have turned out very differently had Lieutenant Churchill of the 21st Lancer division been killed at the Battle of Omdurman in Sudan on 2 September 1898. In the same way, things would have been quite different had Lance Corporal Hitler not survived the gas attack on his trench in southern Ypres from 13 to 14 October 1918. In other words, alternate history is a very useful tool when reflecting critically on history, and is the only tool capable of awakening our minds. The great historical, political, religious, and social evolutions have never been answers to some kind of historical necessity. 'Historical necessity' is an *a posteriori* invention, born from forced or biased readings of

history. Inversely, sometimes the most lucid and astute thinkers are the most easily fooled when they venture into the domain of anticipation, except when they stay within imprecise generalisations.

PL: Many philosophers have dreamed of universal peace. Do you think it is possible or just a utopian fantasy?

DV: By stating that conflict fathers all things, Heraclitus proved himself an astute observer of both men and nature. Conflict is written into the very life of the universe, and the nature of mankind. This is such a truism that even religions which claim to preach universal love have chased down their heretics with ferocious zeal, blessing the sword-bearing arm of those that kept them in power and ensured the success of their conquests. As shocking as it may be, the entirety of history shows that the emotion of hate is just as significant to mankind's humanity as the feeling of love. Consistent experience has shown that mobilisation against a common enemy is one of the greatest factors contributing to group cohesion.

At the end of a life spent crusading against war, Gaston Bouthoul, the founder of polemology,^[8] made the ironic admission that 'pacifists believe themselves to be pacifistic, but their unconscious certainly is not'.

PL: In *The Rebellious Heart*, you wrote that happiness and peace cannot last without the virile determination required to protect them...

DV: Peaceful places do not survive without the virtues required by war, the virtues we expect from those whose functions are to lead and protect. That is, the nobility of the past, and the state in our modern era. Concrete historical thought reminds us that assuring the longevity of the group against outside threats, internecine war, and the threat of internal entropy is the primary function of the state. It is the justification for its existence and the foundation of the legitimacy that, among Europeans, does not come without acquiescence. The designations of enemy and friend,^[9] the affirmation of sovereignty, the authority for making legitimate decision on legal norms, the accepted risk of death as a tragic sanction; such are the attributes of politics. That they may be momentarily forgotten in periods of peace, or

violated by unworthy oligarchs, does nothing but manifest a perilous or illegitimate situation. The security of peoples resides in their homogeneity, their resolution, their intelligence, and their bravery more than in miraculous weapons and treaties.

- [1] Plato's Seventh Letter describes his experiences in Sicily, where he acted as an advisor to two men who were in a power struggle for the tyranny of Syracuse.—Ed.
- [2] Russell was a pacifist who campaigned against imperialism and totalitarianism, and, later, nuclear weapons. Malraux fought on the anti-fascist side in the Spanish Civil War. Carl Schmitt was involved with the Nazis during the early years of the Third Reich, although he became alienated from them by 1937.—Ed.
- [3] English translation of this passage from the Greek taken from Ivor Thomas, *Greek Mathematical Works, Volume II: Aristarchus to Pappus* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1941).—Tr.
- [4] Antisthenes (445–365 BCE) was a philosopher who had been a student of Socrates. He is said to have made this remark to Plato, who replied, 'No, for you have the eye with which a horse is seen, but you have not yet acquired the eye to see horseness.'—Ed.
- [5] Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) was a French Counter-Enlightenment philosopher who fled the Revolution and lived the remainder of his life in Italy. He always remained a staunch opponent of democracy and supported monarchical rule.—Ed.
- [6] Pierre Hadot (1922–2010) was a philosopher who specialised in ancient philosophy, Neoplatonism, and Wittgenstein.—d.
- [7] The Service du travail obligatoire, or Obligatory Work Service, was a forced-labour programme to assist the German war effort in Vichy France.—Ed.
- [8] Polemology is a multidisciplinary study of war. Gaston Bouthoul (1896–1980) was a sociologist who developed it, thinking that by studying the causes of war, eventually a scientific basis for pacifism could be discovered.—Ed.
- [9] This idea was one of Carl Schmitt's fundamental ideas. He regarded the designation of the friend and the enemy of a political community to be the most important characteristic of political sovereignty.—Ed.

10. Homer: Remembering Our Origins

PAULINE LECOMTE: When you talk about European roots, you often invoke Homer. Why harken back to an age so distant?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: Because when it comes to European tradition, Homer is the very source itself. He addresses the massive confusion into which Europe has been thrown. A confusion that is ubiquitous: in politics, religion, common ethics, education, work, and the way Europeans see themselves. Nothing, save perhaps a crude nihilism, can support the appetites of the pleasure-seekers and predators who cloak themselves in moralising discourse. Everything is false and corrupt. Religion itself offers the most contradictory and demoralising discourse of all. How do we find ourselves in it all? In order to break free of the conflict between thought and action, Europeans have no choice but to return to that which truly belongs to them, to the intact, indisputable, incorruptible source of their civilisation. To borrow what the great Hellenist Jacqueline de Romilly once said, we must return to that which is essential, to Homer, to true purity. When looking for the decisive categories of the European soul, those of action, knowledge, beauty, excellence, and tragic wisdom, a look at the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* will bring them all to light if, of course, we ever liberate them from the dusty libraries into which they have been fossilised.

PL: Some time ago, I discovered the ancient Irish epics after having read a book about the Celts by Venceslas Kruta.^[1] The heroic ideal contained therein is very similar to that found in the poems of Homer. Does this kinship of representations suggest a deeper relationship between these ancient peoples?

DV: You are thinking of the kinship between the peoples of the Indo-European language group, who I refer to as 'Boreans', in reference to the legendary Hyperboreans whom the ancient Greeks saw as their ancestors. This kinship has been established by work in

archeology, linguistics, and comparative mythology, making men like Émile Benveniste and Georges Dumézil quite famous. There are many striking examples of this spiritual kinship. You just alluded to one of Venceslas Kruta's books, in which the scholar evokes a character from Celtic mythology, which was put to paper from oral tradition in the Middle Ages.^[2] His name is Cuchulainn, champion of the Ulaidh.^[3] At a very young age, he overhears a Druid prophesise that 'any stripling who on that day should for the first time assume arms and armour, the name of such a one forever would surpass those of all Ireland's youths besides. His life, however, must be fleeting, short'. Upon hearing this he quits his game and asks the king of the Ulaidh for arms. Having taken them, he finds the Druid who made the prophecy, Cathbad, who then attempts to dissuade him by telling him of the terrible fate that awaits him. Cuchulainn shows no fear: 'Little care I, nor though I were but one day or one night in being, so long as after me the history of myself and doings may endure.' Listening to these words naturally reminds us of Achilles in the *Iliad*. He too was aware of, and sought out his fate. At a very young age, like Cuchulainn, he was given the choice between a long and peaceful life, distant from any sort of combat, or an intense, glorious, and short life, snuffed out in the din of battle. He chose the latter, bequeathing a model of tragic greatness to future generations. How else can we explain such similar themes explored in both extremities of ancient Europe, if not by a fundamental kinship? The cult of the hero sacrificed for his own glory is rarely found in the literary tradition of other cultures, while later, it would be repeated in an impoverished fashion in *The Song of Roland*.

Thanks to linguistic research, we know that the ancient peoples of Europe have a common origin, having once spoken the same archaic Indo-European language, from which most modern European languages have descended. Thanks to comparative mythology, without delving into the still very theoretical 'trifunctional hypothesis',^[4] we know that that these peoples, whether they were Celtic or Hellenic, Romans or Germans, all saw the world in the same way.

After the Indo-European, or Borean people, disappeared before the third millenium BCE, several different histories and evolutions took

place influenced by the indigenous peoples and climatic conditions they met. These conditions determined the resulting peoples' distinct ways of living. Two thousand or more years under the dry sunshine of the Aegean inevitably influenced the living and decorative style differently than the misty forests of continental and northern Europe. These differences gave birth to Greek, Celtic, and Germanic cultures. At a glance, these seem to be vastly different from each other, though they are simply contrasting manifestations of the same tradition to which Homer gave the most accomplished and accessible literary expression.

PL: Is it safe to say that Homer's poems contain the first expression of historical thought?

DV: At the beginning of his book *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides uses the *Iliad* to give a quick outline of ancient Greek history, crediting Homer for having laid the foundation. Such a distinction, however, was small when compared to the rest. Inspired by the poetry and the gods, which are one and the same, Homer left us the forgotten source of our tradition, the Greek expression of the whole of European heritage, whether Celtic, Slavic, or Nordic, with incomparable clarity and formal perfection.

PL: In your opinion, what is the most powerful insight presented by the *Iliad*?

DV: Strength and beauty. The *Iliad* is not just a poem about the Trojan War, it is about fate as it was understood by our Borean ancestors, whether they were Greek, Celtic, Germanic, Slavic, or Latin. The poet sings about nobility in the face of war, brave heroes who kill and die, the sacrifice of those who defend their motherland, the sorrows of women, the farewell of the father to his son who lives on, the strain of old age. He sings about a great many more things: the ambitions of kings, their vanity, their quarrels. He sings about bravery and cowardice, friendship, love, and tenderness. Of the need for glory that pulls men up to the height of the gods. This poem, where death reigns, sings about the love of life and of honour that is greater than life, that makes men stronger than gods.

PL: Having demonstrated that Homer contains the preliminary

foundations of historical thought, would you go as far as to say that he also reveals the first inklings of a religious, and perhaps even philosophical thinking, including an extremely refined interpretation of morality emancipated from guilt?

DV: I would, but I would add that Homer does not conceptualise, it is up to the reader to discover the significance behind the things he describes. His heroes are not models of perfection. Their vitality is counterweighted by their subjection to error and immoderation, and they pay the price for it. But Homer implicitly teaches us that men are not the ones responsible for their misfortune, the gods are. This is a complete inversion that responds in advance to the concept of sin that has devastated the European soul. Homer liberates, he does not condemn the pleasures of the senses, of strength, or of sexuality.

Scholarly interpretations have too often neglected, for example, the importance of a moment in the third song of the *Iliad* (III, 196–201).^[5] The beautiful Helen is invited up to the Trojan ramparts by the elderly king Priam following a suspension of hostilities. He asks her to describe the opposing forces on the field below. Well aware of the fact that she has involuntarily caused the war, Helen whimperingly wishes she were dead. Priam replies to her with surprising gentleness: ‘Come here, dear child, sit here beside me; you shall see your onetime lord and your dear kinsmen. You are not to blame, I hold the gods to blame for bringing on this war against the Akhaians, to our sorrow.’ What sensitivity and nobility from an old king whose sons will all be killed. What noble and generous wisdom from Homer himself! Here humans are liberated in advance from the overwhelming guilt so often imposed upon them by other belief systems. It is not men that are guilty: ‘I hold the gods to blame’. The fault, the evil, is not committed by man, but by the gods, that is to say by fate and the mysteries of life.

By putting these words in Priam’s mouth, Homer is not saying that men are never at fault for the misfortunes that affect them. He has shown elsewhere to what extent vanity, envy, anger, stupidity, and other defects incite calamity. But precisely in the case of the Trojan War, like in many other wars, he emphasises the fact that things have

escaped the will of men. It is the gods, chance, destiny itself that calls the shots.

The nobility of this interpretation is striking. Other religions would accuse men and their supposed sins for every disaster that befalls them, including earthquakes.

But Priam's words have an even farther reach. They suggest that the errors that we imagine as such are often simply a matter of chance. This distance in relation to the mysteries of life, in addition to this respect for others, are both constants in Homeric poetry. This implies a very high level of civility in the world described by Homer, to the point that comparisons with our own make it seem barbarous by comparison.

PL: Would you say these works contain a certain worldview for us to decipher?

DV: Yes, and we do indeed need to be able to decipher it. However, it cannot be stressed enough, Homer shows, he does not tell. It is up to us to interpret what he shows. Behind his stories lies a way of looking at both life and the world, one that awakens our memory of a lost wisdom. In Homer, forests, rocks, and wild animals all have a soul. The sacred is associated with nature, and men are certainly not isolated from it. In the immanence of nature, men find the answers to their anxieties, primarily those towards death: 'Very like leaves upon this earth are the generations of men — old leaves, cast on the ground by wind, young leaves the greening forest bears when spring comes in. So mortals pass; one generation flowers even as another dies away' (*Iliad*, VI). Thus turns the wheel of life and seasons, in which every man transmits a piece of himself onto those who follow him, thus assuring himself a portion of eternity.

This sentiment found itself echoed in a different form by the Emperor Augustus, in a speech reported by Cassius Dio, showing that the spirit of Homer was still alive and well: 'Bearing this in mind, we must console the mortal side of our nature with an endless succession of generations that shall be like the torch-bearers in a race, so that through one another we may render immortal the one side of our nature in which we fall short of divine bliss.'

PL: That gives us much to think about. The limitless riches of these poems are slowly being uncovered. The *Iliad* opens with Achilles' rage, and ends with his appeasement when confronted with Priam's grief. Surprising, is it not?

DV: Much more than you can imagine. Homer never sought to sweeten or moralise his interpretation of life. Like the tragic poets that succeeded him, he knew full well that evil can turn around and become good, as demonstrated by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex* when the terrifying Furies become the benevolent Eumenides.

In the eighth song of the *Odyssey*, Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians, offers his hospitality to Odysseus. Before the King, the hero listens to the poet Demodocus recount the story of the Trojan horse, in which the Akhaians breached the walls of Troy. Odysseus becomes overwhelmed by his memories of the conflict, in which he witnessed so much tragedy. He finds it difficult to hide his tears. Alcinous understands what his guest is feeling, and offers him an interpretation of the conflict that glorifies the fate of the fallen warriors for whom Odysseus weeps: 'Tell me why you should grieve so terribly over the Argives and the fall of Troy. That was all gods' work, weaving ruin there so it should make a song for men to come!' (VIII, 601–604). Through songs and poems of glory, the dead transcend the tragedy of their fate in the form of art and beauty. Tragedy is thus transformed into its opposite.

This upward movement is constant. It is what Penelope says about Telemachus, and what Achilles says about his own awareness of his fate. Helen echoes it further in the *Iliad*: '...all of misery, given by Zeus that we may live in song for men to come' (VI, 416–417). Tragedy is the price of glory. Everyone transmits a piece of himself to the generation that follows, assured of the fact that he will become a piece of eternity. A certainty solidified by a recognition of memory, of leaving a trace upon the memory of future generations. Homer's heroes, however, are not ignorant of the fact that even the glory of a noble name eventually disappears as well. What does not pass away is what is on the inside. The knowledge that, having faced oneself with truthful recognition, one has lived nobly, avoided baseness, and

stayed true in his actions to the model he has chosen for himself. But there are things better still in the eyes of Homer, as we will soon see.

PL: Are you alluding to the reversal of good and evil mentioned earlier?

DV: It is essential to our understanding of Homer's conception of beauty. The *Iliad* opens with Achilles' rage: 'Anger be now your song, immortal one, Akhilleus' [*sic*] anger, doomed and ruinous...' The immortal one being invoked is the muse of poetry. She inspires Homer and gives him the ability to transmute Achilles' 'doomed and ruinous' anger into art. The first stanzas of the poem invite us to meditate upon the tragic wisdom that looks down upon pity and profligate compassion. Through the power of art, the worst ('doomed and ruinous' anger) becomes good, that is to say, beautiful. This kind of reversal plays an important part in European literature: *Tristan and Iseult*, *The Princess of Clèves*, *Hamlet*, and countless others. The crueller the fate, the greater and more beautiful it becomes. Here, Homer masterfully accomplishes the aesthetic reversal executed through the same tragic wit later to be mastered by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and others. He offers us a striking example of the great works created by the European mind in response to the mysteries of life. Through him the influence of heroism and beauty is awakened within us.

PL: Who was Homer? This question is quite a controversial one among scholars, is it not?

DV: Ignoring discussions on the matter by scholars who have little to no interest in understanding the poems themselves, all that matters is what the Ancients thought. For the latter, the existence of the divine poet was a fact. Likewise, they never doubted that he wrote both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.^[6]

PL: That said, scholarly works have fostered our understanding of the transmission of these poems, have they not?

DV: In this matter, there have been some invaluable studies, as demonstrated by the exhibition put on by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) in 2007.^[7] It presented for the very first time the rich collections of its Cabinet des médailles.^[8] Patrick Morantin,

comissioner of the exhibit, wrote: 'We must first admire the fact that the entirety of this work has survived the past 3,000 years. The veneration surrounding the work of the esteemed poet must have been quite large, even as the years went on, since these poems managed to survive wars, vandalism, accidents, censorship, and ignorance! Countless works published in antiquity have been lost to us, but we still have both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in their entirety!' He goes on to say that: 'The *Iliad* may be, along with the New Testament, the text for which we have the greatest number of sources.'

Originally it was an oral tradition dating back to the eighth century BCE, though it is quite possible that it was soon written down. Two centuries later, three Athenian statesmen, Pisistratos and his sons, put together the first written edition, dating back to the eleventh century BCE. Moving ahead to the second and third centuries BCE, Homer was the most studied author at the Library of Alexandria, where he was the subject of one of the first scholarly works. This critical activity began with Zenodotus of Ephesus in the first half of the third century BCE, and ended with Aristarchus of Samothrace in the first half of the following century. Starting in the second century BCE, the text became uniform. The Alexandrian scholars created a norm to which all future Homeric scholars would refer. The common source was the edition published in Athens in the sixth century by Pisistratos. For further details, I would refer those interested to the catalogue of the BNF.

PL: Did the transmission of these poems suffer from the fall of the western Roman Empire?

DV: Yes, for many reasons, of which one was the abandoning of Greek in favour of Latin after the fifth century. But the memory of the poems never disappeared, as stated by the BNF: 'If, during the Middle Ages, the link with the original text was cut, Homer's name never ceased to be venerated, nor did the memory of his heroes and their adventures. The poet continued to indirectly nourish the mythic imagination of the Middle Ages via Classical Latin poets such as Virgil, Ovid, and Statius; Latin recensions of the *Iliad*; the apocryphal work of Dares Phrygius and Dictys of Crete; medieval romances such as Benoît

de Sainte-Maure's *The Romance of Troy*, and their prose adaptations; as well as the heroes and the substance of the epic known to the cultivated classes up until the Renaissance, at which time the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were rediscovered in their original form' in Greek.

PL: Was the transmission of the text assured in Byzantium, where Greek remained the official language?

DV: The Byzantine Empire made sure to transmit the works of ancient authors, quickly creating copies of them. The classical tradition was thus maintained in Byzantium where, from 423 until 1453, the schools of Constantinople served as its pillars. This is one of the reasons that it would be wrong to speak of a 'renaissance' in the eastern Roman Empire. In the west, however, the rediscovery of Homer was a highlight for the first Italian humanists. At the behest of Petrarch, who could not read Greek, the first Latin translation of the *Iliad* was made in 1365–66.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 proved to be a defining event. Thankfully, a few literate Byzantines found refuge in Italy shortly before the fall of Byzantium. It is thus that in 1488, the first Greek *editio princeps*^[9] of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* appeared. The first French translation of the *Iliad* was published in 1577 at Breyer.

PL: Many have said that these poems are the source of our literature and of a large portion of our imagination.

DV: Homer left a plethora of words in our vocabulary, of images in our discourse, and of characters in our gallery. Today's European cannot read, listen to, or watch the news without an enlivened adventure being called an *Odyssey*, a clever ruse being referred to as a Trojan horse, a colossal ensemble being described as cyclopean, an allusion to the songs of Sirens, or the danger of falling to Charbydis in Scylla. In praising the allure of the feminine, we invoke the beauty of Helen, or the lasciviousness of Calypso. Cassandra is invoked for dire predictions, 'Achilles' heel' is used to describe a weak point. If we think of the dawn, its 'rosy fingers' come to mind, and so on. Gods and myths, in the way of Aphrodite, Athena, Apollo, Oedipus, and the Amazons, continue to inhabit our imagination.

In composing the *Iliad*, Homer created the very first tragic epic,

and with the *Odyssey*, the very first novel. Both place the individuality of the characters at the center of the tale, something that is not present in the tradition of any other civilisation. The *Iliad* presents a world peopled with countless characters, all distinct from each other. Homer gives them life not through description, but by giving them actions and speech. Hundreds of warriors die, but through specific traits, the poet gives them life at the instant of their death: ‘The next on whom fate closed was Diorês [...] With the bone itself, the vicious stone crushed both leg tendons utterly, and the tall man [Diorês] tumbled down into the dust, flinging his arms out wide to his companions, panting his life away’ (IV, 626–634). By simply reaching out to his comrades in his death throes, the poet manages to make us feel for Diorês, a character we barely know. To the modern reader, this prodigiously inventive style, with its repetitive attributes that served as mnemonic aids for the ancient storytellers, may seem puzzling at first, but the moment he immerses himself in the text he will find himself spellbound.

PL: It would seem as though both death and love of life are omnipresent in the *Iliad*.

DV: In this poem of war, friendship, and love, death is ubiquitous indeed. It suggests a strong understanding of the brevity and instability of life. But Homer’s heroes transfigure their miserable mortal condition by their heroism and will. Such is the meaning behind the words Homer gives to Sarpedon of Lykia as he addresses his brother-in-arms, Glaukos: ‘What is the point of being honoured so with precedence at table, choice of meat, and brimming cups, at home in Lykia, like gods at ease in everyone’s regard? [...] So that we two at times like this in the Lykian front line may face the blaze of battle and fight well, that Lykian men-at-arms may say: “They are no common men, our lords who rule in Lykia” [...] Ah, cousin, could we but survive this war to live forever deathless, without age, I would not ever go again into battle, nor would I send you there for honor’s sake! But now a thousand shapes of death surround us, and no man can escape them, or be safe. Let us attack — whether to give some fellow glory or to win it from him’ (*Iliad*, XII, 348–386). The fate of moral

men lay not in false hopes of immortality, but in glory, ephemeral though it may be.

PL: Old men, women, and children aside, the majority of the characters in the *Iliad* are warriors. Do they differ in personality?

DV: The majority are brave, but not in the same way. The bravery of Ajax, son of Telamon, the greatest Greek after Achilles by virtue of his impressive stature, his strength, and his fearless bravery, is impressive despite his rock-hard stubbornness: ‘He stepped out as formidable as gigantic Arês, wading into the ranks of men, when Zeus drives them to battle in bloodletting fury. Huge as that, the bastion of Akhaians loomed and grinned, his face a cruel mask, his legs moving in great strides. He shook his long spear doubled by its pointing shadow, and the Argives exulted. Now the Trojans felt a painful trembling in the knees, and even Hektor’s heart thumped in his chest [...] Aías^[10] [sic] came nearer, carrying like a tower his body shield of seven oxhides sheathed in bronze...’ (VII, 246–260). A duel soon breaks out between Ajax and Hector who, after several assaults, sustains a neck injury, ‘...and the point went through to nick his furious adversary, making a cut that welled dark blood below his ear’. At nightfall, their heralds intervene and separate the two combatants. Homer demonstrates the point to which single combat is submitted to a sort of chivalric code. The adversaries decide to suspend their duel until the next morning, part ways, and exchange arms (VII, 360–370).

This differs from the bravery of Diomedes, who is filled with the adour and impulsiveness of youth. He is the youngest hero in the *Iliad* after Achilles. He never seems to grow weary. After a long day of combat, he offers himself up for a perillous nocturnal expedition into the Trojan camp with Odysseus, who is as brave as he is cunning and prudent.

Diomedes also has one of the most chivalric temperaments of the narrative. One day, while in a heated battle with a Trojan, in the midst of a strike he learns that his adversary is Glaukos, son of a good friend of his father: ‘At this, joy came to Diomêdês [sic], loud in battle. With one thrust in the field where herds had cropped he fixed his long spear like a pole, and smiled at the young captain, saying gently:

“Why, you are my friend! My grandfather, Oineus, made friends of us long years ago [...] So let us keep away from one another’s weapons in the spear-fights of this war. Trojans a-plenty will be left for me, and allies, as god puts them in my path; many Akhaians will be left for you to bring down if you can. Each take the other’s battle-gear; let those around us know we have this bond of friendship from our fathers”. They both then jump from their chariots and shake hands, solidifying the friendship (*Iliad*, VI, 249–277).

PL: What is most striking is the point to which mere warriors are given such well-rounded personalities based on Homer’s masterful descriptions.

DV: It is true that Homer dignifies well-rooted individuality. This, combined with respect for one’s adversary, despite the deadly nature of combat, forms the bedrock of our tradition. We find traces of it in the modern *Iliad* that is Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*. This living bedrock dominates the European psyche, from tragedy to philosophy. The individuality of these heroes is depicted artistically starting with the statuary of ancient Greece, but it also irrigates our political and legal institutions.

It cannot be stressed enough that Homer does not conceptualise like the philosophers who followed him. Homer reveals, shows us living examples that teach us the qualities that make a man *kalos agathos*, noble and accomplished. As Peleus advises his son Achilles: ‘Do none but great feats, to be distinguished above the rest’ (*Iliad*, XI, 905–906). For men, to be brave and handsome, for women, to be soft, caring, and loyal. The poet has left us with a condensed version of what became the legacy of the Greeks, nature as our model, beauty as our goal, the creative force that always pushes towards self-overcoming, and excellence as the ideal of life.

PL: Let’s talk about the structure and composition of the *Iliad*.

DV: Such a poem would have never left such a significant mark, nor have survived the sands of time, had it not been an excellent work of art and faith. In 16,000 verses and 24 songs, the poem talks about a brief episode at the end of the ten-year siege of Troy, presumably at the end of the thirteenth century BCE. Troy, otherwise known as Ilion

(hence *Iliad*), is a powerful, fortified city-state built at the western entrance of the Dardanelles, on the Asiatic side of the Hellespont, the latter being the border between the Orient and the Occident. The historians of antiquity, Herodotus and Thucydides, perhaps more so than their modern counterparts, certainly did not doubt the fact that the events framing the *Iliad* took place. The Trojans are Boreans (Europeans) of the same race as their Greek adversaries, the 'blonde-haired' Akhaians, otherwise known as Argives (men of Argos), or Danaäns (descendants of the mythic Danaus). The big difference between the two is that Troy is associated with Asia, and not just for geographical reasons. The army includes several barbarian^[11] contingents, as has been confirmed by archeological discoveries in the twentieth century, exposing Trojan relations with the composite Hittite Empire.

According to tradition, the conflict had a divine origin, with groups of gods supporting either side. Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans) vindictively gave the young Trojan prince Paris, son of the ageing king Priam, the power to seize Helen, a woman of great beauty already married to Menelaus 'of the golden hair', the Akhaian king of Sparta. The abduction of a royal wife by a stranger is a crime that affected every Akhaian. When the two were wed, the nobles of Greece all swore an oath to defend the union of Menelaus and the ever desirable Helen. Thus, an army was mustered at Aulis with a fleet of swift vessels, comparable to the later Viking drakkars, which sailed off towards the Asiatic coast of the Troad. These men swore to bring their vengeance to Troy, and to bring back Helen. And thus the war began. 'The entire world, near and far, laughed at the bronze radiance...'

PL: The saga begins with Achilles' anger, which lasts until its ultimate reversal. Could you evoke the circumstances?

DV: After a decade-long siege involving various raids along the Trojan coast, an argument drives a wedge between Agamemnon, head of the Akhaian coalition, and Achilles, the most famous hero of his retinue. Abusing his power, Agamemnon takes Briseis, Achilles' beloved young captive, for himself. This is the pretext and the start of the poem: 'Anger be now your song, immortal one, Akhilleus' [*sic*]

anger, doomed and ruinous...' This immortal one is the muse as interpreted by the poet, emphasising the link with the divine.

Filled with righteous anger, Achilles decides to leave the battle after having copiously insulted Agamemnon. He 'retires to his tent' along with his men (the Myrmidons).

Achilles' anger with his adversary, Hektor the Trojan, serves as the poem's pivot. His and his men's retreat has grave consequences for the rest of the Akhaian host. Victory abandons them. On the battlefield, at the foot of the Trojan walls, they will be faced with three defeats, each more disastrous than the last. Initially on the offensive, they are quickly forced to go on the defensive. They are even forced to build an entrenchment around their ships. This entrenched position is eventually broken through by the Trojans, led by Hektor, the most famous of Priam's sons. The enemy sets about burning the Greek vessels and throwing them into the sea.

Throughout these skirmishes that fill the poem with carnage and feats, Achilles' absence serves to underline his strength and prowess. The bravest Akhaian leaders, the massive Ajax, the fiery Diomedes, the cunning Odysseus, all vainly attempt to replace him.

One dark, tragic night, between two disasters, as Achilles is eaten up by the inactivity into which he has condemned himself, Ajax and Odysseus enter his tent, along with the elderly Phoenix, son of Amyntor. The latter attempts to get Achilles to heed his father's words. Faced with the danger of defeat, Agamemnon has repented. He gives back Briseis and offers sumptuous riches on top of everything else in an attempt to make things right. Achilles stubbornly and spitefully refuses, squarely placing himself in the wrong (IX).

The next morning, the Trojans break through the Greek defences. Hektor burns a boat. On the other side of the camp, Achilles sees the flames. Despite his stubbornness, he is unable to resist the supplication of his friend, Patroclus. He accepts to lead his troops into battle and gives Patroclus his own armour. This counter-offensive pushes the Trojans back, but Patroclus is killed by Hektor. Achilles' sorrow is fearsome, awakening a furious rage and thirst for vengeance against Hektor.

PL: Is this the moment in which the action, frozen by Achilles' retreat, breaks free in violent torrents?

DV: Yes. Wild with grief, the Akhaian hero jumps into battle like '[a] forest fire will rage through deep glens of a mountain, crackling dry the summer heat, and coppices blaze up in every quarter as wind whips the flame: so Akhilleus [*sic*] flashed to right and left like a wild god, trampling the men he killed, and black earth ran with blood' (Book XX). After a fierce duel, he kills Hektor and ties his corpse to the back of his chariot, pulling it along triumphantly.

PL: What is interesting about Achilles is that he already knows the tragic fate that awaits him. Is it possible that he even chose such an end for himself?

DV: The knowledge and certainty of his own end is made stronger by the pain of losing his friend. An ancient prediction foretold that he would die upon defeating Hektor. Achilles has always known this. Unlike the other heroes who die around him, he has always known his fate, and indeed, chose it for himself. Rather than suffer and cower before it, he faces it. As a young man, he was given the choice between a long and peaceful life far from the flames of war, and a short, intense life that would be cut off in the din of battle. It is the latter that he chose for himself, bequeathing a model of tragic greatness to the men that came after him. Free of illusions, he knows that no other life awaits him: 'A man may come by cattle and sheep in raids; tripods he buys, and tawny-headed horses; but life's breath cannot be hunted back or recaptured once it passes his lips' (Book IX).

PL: This thought continues to speak to us. Is there an equivalent to it in the sacred texts of other cultures?

DV: The freedom and sovereignty of Homer's heroes is unique. Certainly, the gods do intervene in the *Iliad* from time to time, but never in a way that steps over man's autonomy. Their numerous interventions simply hasten what is already inevitable. Further, it is quite obvious that Homer doesn't take them too seriously, save perhaps Athena. As an uptight moraliser, this way of thinking outraged Plato. In truth, Homer's gods are not moral figures, they are simply allegories for the forces of life and nature.

PL: The *Iliad* is not just about heroes and warriors. There are also women, Helen, Hecuba, and Andromache; children (Astyanax); and elders (Priam). Are there cowards too?

DV: Hektor's brother, Paris. His strange elopement with Helen is the cause of the war. Following Aphrodite's wishes, he is Helen's seducer and kidnapper. As the involuntary cause of the war, he is also the one who ends it by killing Achilles with a treacherous arrow. This is an event that does not occur in the poem, but is implied by Hektor's prophetic last words (XXII).

Paris, aggressive and often conceited and cowardly, is the antithesis of his brother Hektor, who despises him. Hektor is the pure hero, defender of Troy, while Paris is the 'scourge of his nation'. The lady he kidnapped, Helen, feels naught but disdain for him, and does not shy away from openly insulting him: 'Home from the war? You should have perished there, brought down by that strong soldier, once my husband. You used to say you were a better man, more skillful with your hands, your spear. So why not challenge him to fight again? I wouldn't if I were you. No, don't go back to war against the tawny-headed man of war like a rash fool. You'd crumple under his lance' (III, 518–526). She detests him, but, by the will of Aphrodite, she is powerless against his sexual magnetism. Once again, Homer does not explain, he tells and what he says to us is full of complex truths.

PL: Would you agree that Helen is one of the richest characters of the *Iliad*? One of the ones through which Homer best expresses his conception of the world and of human destiny?

DV: Helen is the opposite of Paris. She is moral even when faced with an immoral lover. She revolts against the physical submission imposed upon her by Aphrodite. She was naturally born for order. She never ceases to miss the days in which her life was well-ordered: 'Painful death would have been sweeter for me, on the day I joined your [Priam] son, and left my bridal chamber, my brothers, my childhood friends! But no death came, though I have pined and wept' (III, 205–209). Nothing predisposed her to the role of an adultress instrumental in the downfall of two peoples. Nothing, save the intervention of the gods, that is to say of fate.

PL: An interesting trait particular to the *Iliad* is the pitting of several antagonistic natures against each other: Helen and Paris, Achilles and Hektor.

DV: Achilles is the incarnation of youth — he is under 30 years old. He is also the incarnation of Force. He is the radiant, uncontrolled Force before which everything submits, a Force which bends to passion. Achilles dominates nothing, but he is affected by everything: Briseis, Agamemnon, Hektor. Circumstances unchain successive storms of temper within him. Everything within him defies death. He never thinks about it, as he knows it is always nearby. He loves life enough to prefer intensity to longevity. Quite a strange destiny! His love of glory, his impatience, and his anger keep him far from the action during the first eighteen songs of the poem, to the point of endangering his compatriots. In order to save the army, all he would have to do is get up, as Odysseus tells him.

Awakened by the death of Patroclus, his Force lifts him to his feet: ‘Akhilleus [*sic*], whom Zeus loved, now rose [...] the great sound shocked the Trojans into a tumult, as a trumpet blown by a savage foe shocks an encircled town, so harsh and clarion was Akhilleus’ [*sic*] cry’ (XVIII).

Everything leads him to oppose Hektor, with whom Homer implicitly sympathises. The Poem of the Akhaians thus provides an example of their main enemy. What freedom! If he is as brave as Achilles, Hektor’s bravery is at least not as blind. He incarnates the very essence of stoic courage. He does not ignore fear, he overcomes it. Sensing that everything is lost, he fights with every fibre of his being.

Hektor is also the incarnation of patriotism. His honour is bound to his duty. He is ready to die, not just for his own glory, but for that of his nation, his wife, and his child. He defends these against all hope, as he is well aware of the fact that Troy is lost.

There are few things more physical than Hektor’s love for his nation, of which his wife and child are the concrete manifestations. Before leaving to return to battle, he does not hide his fears from his wife, Andromache: ‘Long ago I learned how to be brave, how to go

forward always and to contend for honor, Father's and mine. Honor — for in my heart and soul I know a day will come when ancient Ilion falls, when Priam and the folk of Priam perish. Not by the Trojan's anguish on that day am I so overborne in mind — the pain of Hékabê herself, or Priam king, or of my brothers, many and valorous, who will have fallen in dust before our enemies — as by your own grief, when some armed Akhaian takes you in tears, your free life stripped away [...] Let me be hidden dark down in my grave before I hear your cry or know you captive!' (VI, 517–540). At these words he extends his arm toward his son. But the child breaks out in tears, scared by the shining helmet of his father. Laughing, Hektor puts the helmet down, and gives the boy back to Andromache, who takes her son in her arms, 'laughing through her tears'. Homer's poetic genius is palpable in this scene. Hektor tactfully corrects his sombre predictions: 'Unquiet soul, do not be too distressed by thoughts of me. You know no man dispatches me into the undergloom against my fate...'

Moments before, Andromache begged Hektor not to expose himself to danger. Suddenly her worry is gone. She understands that he seeks to defend her freedom and the tenderness they share. In this conversation between marriage partners we find something unique in ancient literature, a perfect equality in marriage. The incomparable richness of the *Iliad* is ever-present, as it continues with Hektor's funeral preparations, not including the episodes of Achilles' death or of the Trojan horse, which will both be evoked in the *Odyssey* (songs XI and VIII).

PL: Let's talk about the *Odyssey* now, if we may.

DV: The second of the great poems tells in about 12,000 verses and 24 songs Odysseus' difficult trip back to his homeland, a voyage impeded by countless traps and dangers. The *Odyssey* is a poem about homeward journeys and just vengeance.

But the *Odyssey* is more than that. Under different narrative pretexts than the *Iliad*, it suggests a 'worldview' unique to the Hellenes. It demonstrates man's place in nature, and his relationship with the mysterious forces that command it.

The harmony between mortals and the cosmic order is at the heart

of the *Odyssey*. But Homer's horizons are beyond those of the primitive epoch in which the cosmic myths, as described by Hesiod's *Theogony*, were conceived. From the confrontation between Uranus and Cronos, and the battle of the Olympians against the Titans, Homer retains only the Olympian light, without worrying about creating a coherent system. For the poet, coherence is not the discourse; it is found within it.

The split with, and the return to, the cosmic order forms the basis of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus involuntarily provokes the wrath of Poseidon by blinding his son, Polyphemus the cyclops. Such is the fate of men. Without intending it, they provoke disasters and the anger of the gods (the latter representing natural forces). They must then fight and endure torments in order to restore harmony. This will be Odysseus' fate. Confronting the terrifying ordeals conjured up by Poseidon, who throws him into a chaotic world of monsters (Charybdis and Scylla), and possessive or perverse nymphs (Calypso, Circe, the Sirens), not to mention a visit to the kingdom of the dead. The brave navigator tirelessly fights to escape these traps and to rediscover his place in the order of the world. Hastened by traps and mortal dangers, it takes him ten years to return home. Homer seeks to do more than simply charm his audience with fantastic stories. Odysseus' long journey is extended by his invincible desire to escape the world of chaos and to rediscover the ordered cosmos of 'bread-eating' men. His love for Penelope and his nostalgia for his native Ithaca are certainly at the heart of his desire to return home. But they exist in order to illustrate his desire to return to the natural order of the world. Having returned to, and reconquered, his homeland, Odysseus can finally take back his piece of eternity, his link in the chain of generations.

PL: The reader (or listener, since the poems originally existed in oral tradition) is taken by the rhythm of the story, even when he knows it perfectly. Do you think this is unique to sacred texts?

DV: One can tirelessly read and re-read these poems. In the final sequence, every episode of the reconquest of Ithaca imprints itself upon the reader's memory up to the massacre of the 'pretenders' (the usurpers of Ithaca), such as the way in which the hero makes himself

known to his son Telemachus and how they plan their vengeance together. How Odysseus returns to his manor, disguised as a beggar, recognised only by his dog, Argos, who nearly dies of joy. How he is recognised by his old wetnurse, Eurycleia, who notices an old boar-hunting scar of his. And finally, Penelope, troubled, worried, and full of questions. When the time of vengeance comes, it is an orgy of blood. Finally the reunion between Penelope and her husband occurs. Athena intervenes, delaying the arrival of the 'rosy fingered' dawn so that the night may last longer...

In the *Odyssey*, Homer no longer sings the memory of heroes. He glorifies Eurycleia the wetnurse, as well as Eumaeus, Odysseus' swineherd. Both are subordinate characters who are portrayed as incredibly intelligent and loyal. Their role is of the utmost importance in the reconquest of Ithaca. Thanks to Homer, they live on in our memory.

PL: Does the assertive presence of Penelope in the *Odyssey* also make it a poem about respected, independent femininity?

DV: When Penelope walks into a room in the palace of Ithaca, grand and beautiful, with brilliantly veiled cheeks like the golden Aphrodite, the pretenders fall to their knees and desire invades their hearts (*Odyssey*, XVIII).

Lover, wife, and mother, Penelope is in charge of the small kingdom of Ithaca in Odysseus' absence, which signifies the considerable significance of femininity. Many other women are present in Homer. The *Iliad* has Helen, Andromache, Hekuba, and Briseis. In the *Odyssey* we see Helen once again, Calypso, and the charming Nausicaa. But Penelope eclipses them all, save perhaps Helen, who stands apart. Like women of our day, she feels the pressure to remain feminine in a social world dominated by male values. She suffers but never abdicates. She knows how to maintain her beauty despite her age. She also knows the importance of modesty when living in a male society. When she finds herself overly tormented, she finds refuge in sleep, watched over by Athena. Faced with a hungry swarm of pretenders, she does not fight them with the masculine art of violence. Rather, she uses subterfuge; she smiles,

while crafting an endless web in which she turns the covetousness of the pretenders, something she may not necessarily dislike, to her advantage. Upon Odysseus' return, despite being the most cunning of men, she manages to fool him into thinking she does not recognise him, even after he massacres the pretenders with the help of their son, Telemachus. He must first prove his identity by means of the secret of the conjugal bed before she consents to give herself to him. In what sacred texts of other cultures can one find Penelope's equivalent in her brilliant femininity?

PL: Your interpretation suggests the notion that Homer has left us role models to live up to. How should we interpret them?

DV: The point of a role model is not servile imitation, but to offer living principles that inspire. When we live in the company of people who walk with nobility, if we are not of low-born disposition, we feel an impulsion. It is thus that Homer has left us our life principles: nature as our basis, excellence as our goal, beauty as our horizon.

For us as Frenchmen and Europeans, of Celtic and Germanic descent, as for all those who come from similar or neighbouring origins, these poems translate the unique originality of our way of existing, of being men and women before life, death, childbirth, and the city-state. By narrating the ordeals and the passions of our very distant ancestors by cousinhood, they tell us that our anxieties, our hopes, our sorrows, and our joys have already been felt by our predecessors, who were also young, sometimes passionate to the point of folly, but also wise and astute. Achilles cedes to the fervour of tempestuous blood, Priam finds the courage to have his son's corpse returned, Helen lives in open revolt against the sorcery imposed upon her, Andromache is the anguished young wife and mother, Odysseus is tenacious and crafty, there is lucid Hektor who is sacrificed, there is Penelope who is tireless and faithful, and there is the wise and resolute Nestor. Yes, the things they tell us through their actions are still relevant. Their stories speak to us about feelings with which we are familiar, ever so different than those suggested by even the loveliest legends of Asia or the Middle East. They expound upon the respect for our ancestors and enchanted nature, respect for femininity,

and disdain for baseness and ugliness. Homer tells us that there is no other life but our own. According to words uttered centuries later by Heidegger, man's essence is in his existence. Homer provides an answer well in advance to the great question posed by Nietzsche's nihilism (the death of God). The answer is not to live life for life's sake. Life is worthless unless it is given a concrete form by devoting it to a higher goal.

PL: In certain works, you refer to a 'Homeric triad'. What do you mean by that?

DV: With Homer, the future takes root in the memory of the past. This memory leaves us a triad in which to tie our souls and our conducts: nature as basis, excellence as goal, beauty as horizon.

[1] Venceslas Kruta, *The Celts* (London: Hachette Illustrated, 2004).

[2] Into a group of texts known as the 'Ulster cycle', though the specific text being referred to here is the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, or 'Cattle-Raid of Cooley'. Interested readers should seek out the translation from the Irish by Thomas Kinsella.—Tr.

[3] The ancient tribe inhabiting the region of Ulster.—Tr.

[4] This theory was first developed by Georges Dumézil (1898–1986), who was a French philologist best known as a pioneer in mythology. He also studied the nature of sovereignty in ancient Indo-European civilisations, which led him to postulate the Trifunctional Hypothesis: namely, that Indo-European culture had developed along a tripartite structure of warriors, priests, and farmers. He believed that this was the origin of both the Hindu caste system and the feudal system in medieval Europe.—Ed.

[5] Where the author has quoted Homer, I have used the corresponding quotes and line numbers from Robert Fitzgerald's translations of the *Iliad* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), and the *Odyssey* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961).—Tr.

[6] Jacqueline de Romilly, *Homère* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1985).

[7] The exhibit, entitled *Homère, Sur les traces d'Ulysse* (Homer, in Ulysses' Footsteps) and put on by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, was accompanied by an excellent catalogue published by the three commissioners of the exhibit: Olivier Estiez, Mathilde Jamain, and Patrick Morantin. (*Homère, Sur les traces d'Ulysse* [Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2006].—Ed.)

[8] The Cabinet des Médailles, or more formally, the Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, is a department of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. It is a collection of engraved gems, coins, and antiquities.—Tr.

[9] The first printed edition of a work, after it has been circulated only in manuscript form.—Ed.

[10] Alternate transliteration of Ajax.—Tr.

[11] In the original etymological sense: the Greek term for 'foreigner'.

11. Mysticism and Politics

PAULINE LECOMTE: Throughout the twentieth century and even today, a great number of men and women have 'entered into politics as one would enter into a religion'. Would you say that this image is equivocal?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: Very much so. Since the French Revolution, the ensuing burst of political ideas, and the crystallisation of ideological passions that gave impetus to both the 'avant-gardes' and the masses, the content of politics has been permanently transformed. This was a result of the great mess of representations inaugurated in Western Europe at the end of the seventeenth century. We have assisted in the progressive erasure of old religious beliefs as the expectancy of 'another world' has gradually weakened. This mental revolution has left the inherent human need for religiosity, and for a belief beyond the nature imposed upon man by race and culture, vacant. Starting in 1789, this need for religiosity found refuge in the often fanatical ardour of radical political myths of revolutions and counter-revolutions.

PL: The flame of political mysticism was never so strong as during the period between 1917 and 1945, in which Communism faced off against fascism. Following this period, the flame died out, at least here in Europe. Where did all that enthusiasm come from?

DV: From the thirst for religiosity of which I have just spoken. When the European masses gave into the Communist or fascist dream, they felt an anticipation that could not be satiated by the religious institutions of their time. As demonstrated by the historian Emilio Gentile in his book *La religion fasciste*,^[1] fascism, just like Communism (despite operating in a different way), served as a sort of secular religion. This, of course, was all a big mistake. At the end of the day, since fascism existed mainly in the domain of politics, it could not but disappoint the expectations placed upon it. The moral revolution imagined by the authentic idealists of the movement was a task that exceeded the powers of the state.

Politics does not belong to the same order of things as the chivalric ethic, stoic wisdom, or religiosity. Its field is that of power, and of action in the name of power. It is the domain of ambition, of cunning, and of pitiless fighting, and only very rarely that of honour and loyalty. Cynicism, guile, and dissimulation are the rules of the game, a fact well described in *Le Fil de l'épée*,^[2] a Machiavellian treatise published in 1932 by the future General de Gaulle, who would prove to be an expert in the field.

PL: How was the erroneous experience of political religiosity perceived by its partisans?

DV: Concerning France, fascism never became a reality. It always remained an imprecise political construct. In order to elucidate this, we can take a look at the work of Maurice Bardèche. This writer interests us because of his sincerity. He never recanted anything and wrote a great deal. As a well-known literary critic (a specialist on Balzac), a sharp mind, and a lover of letters, he did not take up the fasces until 1945, after the defeat. Without the execution of his brother-in-law, Robert Brasillach, he never would have donned the famous black shirt, which could then be considered the tunic of a martyr. After publishing a number of pamphlets that brought him to trial several times, he launched a journal entitled *Défense de l'Occident*^[3] in 1952 that, even up to its last issue in November 1982, was the intellectual rendezvous of the many currents of the radical Right. In 1961, he published an essay entitled *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme?*^[4] In it, he gave his own interpretation of the phenomenon that enticed him so.

PL: How does he define fascism?

DV: What is most striking in Bardèche's interpretation of fascism is the absence of politics. Not of the word itself, which is quite present, but of the thing itself, the political reality. His remarks have little in common with the Italian regime of 1922 to 1943. He speaks of an idealised fascism. 'Unlike democratic states, fascist states do not hesitate to teach morals.' He then defines the aforementioned morality: 'Fascism does not merely propose another image of the nation, but of man. Fascism prizes some human qualities above all

others [...] courage, discipline, the spirit of sacrifice, energy [...] pride, scrupulousness in vows, generosity, respect for a courageous adversary, protection of the weak and weaponless, contempt for liars, and respect for those who fight fair.' But to this, Bardèche adds: 'This is the fascist dream, which was the dream in the hearts of a few.'^[5]

Bardèche is therefore well aware that the ideal about which he writes was not practiced by the fascist regimes of the twentieth century, soiled as they were by the atrocities committed on both sides during the Second World War, with accounts of cruelty against civilian populations. Neither does he evoke the fascist instrumentalisation of power, a caesarism for the industrial age.

Bardèche develops a moralist discourse, not a political one in the concrete sense of the word. There is nothing on political doctrine in the tradition of Charles Maurras, Carl Schmitt, or Giovanni Gentile (the theoretician of the Fascist state). Bardèche's dream is his own: ethical and quasi-religious.

PL: One of the bigger errors committed by fascist groups from the 1920s until the 1940s was their implied belief that political engagement called for a return to the aristocratic virtues eliminated by the rise of the bourgeoisie. Do you agree?

DV: It cannot be denied that the goal of the majority of the leading Italian Fascists was the creation of a new man. They believed in the myth of revolution as a moral regeneration. They believed that this regeneration could be entrusted to the educative action of the state, which is emblematic of the heroic values and of a religion of the fatherland. A rule established for the Fascist militia on 3 October 1922 illustrates this ideal: 'The Fascist militant must serve Italy in accordance with the spirit in which breathes a profound mysticism, supported by an unbreakable faith, dominated by inflexible will, despising opportunists, prudence, and trickery, resolute in sacrifice as the goal of his faith...' A number of Fascist leaders remained faithful to this ideal until death. Nevertheless, the Fascist religion vanished with the regime that incarnated it. Political religions, vigorous as they may be, are implicitly condemned by the end they seek, which is ephemeral in essence and subordinate to end results. As the attrition

of time, or worse, historical defeat, manifests itself, the religion volatilises itself, leaving nothing but nostalgia. This was worse yet with German National Socialism. Its 'religious' character was far greater than that of Italian Fascism, but its destruction led to the complete eradication of its message, of which nothing remains.

PL: Isn't the error then the pretention posed by the idea of a 'political religion' in the first place?

DV: In 1912, Gustave Le Bon wrote *La Psychologie des revolutions*,^[6] making him the first to show that revolutionary politics are by their very nature a sort of political, secular religion, as Jules Monnerot would have put it. However, there are differences in nature between politics and religion, monotheistic or otherwise. Just as with tragic wisdom and the stoicism of the ancients, one after the other, enduring religions have shown themselves able to survive the greatest defeats. Founded upon beliefs intended to be eternal and beyond the temporal, they escape the sanctions imposed upon political activism by results. Time has little influence on them. The 'truths' they preach are beyond time. They bring answers to the lives of everyone, independent of politics. So long as they do not blow themselves out of the water, their beliefs manage to survive.

PL: In *The Century of 1914*, you wrote a long chapter about the Spanish Civil War and the misunderstood Falange movement. Does the ultimate destiny of this movement not illustrate what you are trying to say about the errors of political religiosity?

DV: Even more so than Italian Fascism. The Falange, created in Spain by José Antonio Primo de Rivera in October 1933, had a greater ethical ambition, one that was not destroyed by historical failure. No, this ambition was negated because it pretended to find its incarnation in the field of politics, a field to which it is foreign.

When the Spanish Civil War began in July 1936, the Falange was an active, but small-scale movement. All its founders and the majority of its leaders were killed in the first months of the war. Its social program and its martyrs were cynically exploited by General Franco, who needed myths in order to rally the masses. Void of substance, compromised by a clerical and conservative dictatorship, the Falange

was unable to realise any of its ambitions. When Franco died in 1975, it was but an empty shell that died with him.

PL: Were the Falange partisans aware of this impasse?

DV: Twenty years before the death of Franco, on 20 November 1956, for the twentieth anniversary of the death of its founder, the Secretary General of the movement, José Luis de Arrese gave a lucid but disheartened speech: 'José Antonio, are you happy with us? I don't think you are. Why not? Because you fought against materialism and selfishness, while men of today, having forgotten the grandeur of your message, have made these their idols. Because you preached sacrifice, while men today deny it...' All of this is correct. But this observation of defeat lacks an explanation. The failure of the Falange was not simply a result of the cruel fate imposed upon it in July 1936. The real cause of its decline was the inherent opposition between the idealism of the Falangists and the triviality of politics. The idealism of its founders was incompatible with the political terrain upon which they sought to accomplish it. The confusion of types hastened an inevitable end.

PL: Was the founder, José Antonio, aware of this fundamental flaw in his movement?

DV: As a victim of the illusions of his time, José Antonio could not see what was to come. With total sincerity, he spoke with the language of a mystic or a poet: 'We, without means, with this poverty, with these difficulties, are gathering all there is of fertility and value in our Spain. And we want the difficulties to go on, to the end and after the end: we want life to be hard for us before victory and after victory...We, then, who have set upon the road to Paradise the lives of the best among us, seek a Paradise arduous, erect, implacable; a Paradise that never knows repose and has, standing at its gateway on either side, angels with swords.'^[7] The young founder of the Falangist movement never imagined that by placing his longed-for 'triumph' in the realm of politics, he inadvertently made an illusion of it. We will not have the same excuse for practicing the same illusions.

The history of the last century has taught us that revolution, and the taking and exercising of power, are mirages that engulf the most

noble of hopes. Like many leaders and radical militants, José Antonio was an idealist who had political ideas. His idealism could not but break upon the hard bedrock of pragmatism. Without knowing it, he held within him a fatal contradiction. Conversely, General Franco was well attuned to his goals. He was a pragmatic politician devoid of idealism. His personality, ambitions, and his field of action were in perfect harmony. He was at home in politics while José Antonio was not.

PL: Rather eloquent comparison. But isn't it a bit harsh towards the idealists of 1936?

DV: I repeat, I have the greatest respect for José Antonio's character and that of his closest comrades. The question lies in whether or not it was possible to give their ideas a political incarnation. For us, well aware of the eventual end of this movement, it would be unacceptable to perpetuate the same illusions. The Falangist ideals were more in the realm of mysticism than of politics. They could not be realised through the wielding of power. José Antonio and his compatriots were victims of a period when people attributed the ability to recreate man, to transform him spiritually in his interior, to the 'revolution'. The appearance of this thinking coincided with the French Revolution, a dream that was then protracted into the entirety of the nineteenth century and a good portion of the twentieth, up until the crumbling of Communism in 1991.

The romantic dream of revolution rested upon the illusion of the formidable 'coup' capable of changing history. It rested on the big, red myth of 'seizing power'. On the Left, they believed that the 'revolution' would bring about liberty and equality. On the Right, they believed it would transform the bourgeoisie into knights... It is incontestable that under the influence of exceptional events and powerful dynamism, men were changed in the period of one generation, often at the price of great suffering. But since the change took place in the trivial, ephemeral world of politics, and not in the eternal, higher order of spirituality, the time came when the ideal would be sullied by the exercising of power, low-born labour,

pushiness, routine, and failures. Two centuries of 'revolutionary' experiences made this truth manifest.

PL: A little discouraging, wouldn't you say?

DV: Sincere combatants who died without knowing the end result of their illusions were quite lucky. They were fulfilled in their action and ennobled in their sacrifice, even if the 'cause' for which they fought was contestable or illusory. Fighting for an ideal is the most envious of destinies. Clearly, it is not that sort of behaviour that I am criticising. Much to the contrary, I admire the abnegation of these fighters.

What I am examining is the ultimate goal and the form in which it is inscribed. If one aims for a higher ethical goal, it is best to be aware of the fact that such a thing is not meant for a political or 'revolutionary' vocation. Every young person who attempts to fulfil their ideals in politics, without intending to make a career out of it, is exposing themselves to great disillusionment. However, it is important to note that political activism, even of an illusory nature, helps build a strong personality, in addition to bringing about the satisfaction of having undertaken a great adventure and of having accomplished something. This is something I have experienced myself.

But once again, my focus is on the type of action to undertake, and of what kind of institution best serves the higher ideal that unfortunately seems to endlessly confound itself with the empty promises of politics.

PL: And what answers have you found?

DV: Historically, I am very much interested in India's recent history and the renaissance of Hinduism, which gave birth to a sort of church movement that linked politics and religion, and religion and identity. The existence of this movement, well-known by scholars, was revealed to the Western public by what happened in India in 1998. At that time, after several years of fighting, the Hindu nationalist party known as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took power in the legislative elections. This put them at the head of the Indian government for the next several years, in which they favoured the economic modernisation of their gigantic country. In 2004, the

democratic process brought the Indian National Congress back to power for an undetermined period of time.^[8] That, of course, is not the issue.

Contrary to European nationalisms, Hindu nationalism is not confined to politics. One could even go as far as to say that politics isn't even a secondary concern of the party. Its 'religious' character is identitarian and given priority. It rests upon the awakening of a Hindu consciousness, a traditional spirituality specific to the founding peoples of India.

PL: Could you give us a quick historical summary of the movement?

DV: After having experienced a golden age from the fourth century BCE to the eighth century AD, the civilisation born of Hinduism experienced a period of decline made possible by the erosion of its tradition, following foreign conquests: the Muslim conquest of the thirteenth century, for example, that forcefully converted a large portion of the population, and then that of the British, who imposed their culture while systematically exploiting the country. The idea of a return to the source of Hinduism was initially developed in the 1890s by the author B G Tilak.^[9] He dreamed of identitarian activism separate from the realm of politics. His goal was to promote the renaissance of Hinduism by creating schools and journals, as well as by organising large religious demonstrations (festivals for Ganesh and Shivaji).

Starting in 1905, the Tilakian current manifested itself in the Indian National Congress, which united all those with anti-colonial, anti-British tendencies. This party would lead India to independence in 1947. The direction given to the party by Gandhi and Nehru, who were both Westernised (despite their traditional appearance), effectively managed to marginalise the Tilakian tendency, which was then slowly but surely excluded from politics. In spite of this, the movement would eventually reconstitute itself underground with the help of several identitarian currents, the most important of which was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), or 'National Patriotic Association'.

PL: What is the origin of the RSS?

DV: The RSS was formed in Nagpur in September 1925 by a group of young people in Dr K.B Hedgewar's entourage. Today the movement counts some two million members. Hedgewar was a disciple of Tilak. His intention was to promote a return to tradition while fighting Islam, Christianity, and Westernisation, all of which were seen as destructive forces acting upon Indian culture. The RSS developed a spirituality founded upon the Vedic ideal of the cosmic order, which is very Indo-European in principle. Its goal is the improvement of man, seen as the primary condition for the revitalisation of society (and not the other way around). Among the cultivated virtues, combative ardour is given first rank. The RSS favours an ennobled kind of scoutism that places martial arts in the place of well-wishes.

It is important to emphasise that from the very beginning, the RSS has considered politics secondary to action. Its statutes interdict it from participating in political activity, in any event. Its strategy consists of diffusing the cult of tradition into the heart of society by way of a network of its adherents, journals, schools, and charitable organisations.

PL: Does the movement have a strong political influence?

DV: While separating itself from politics, the RSS has played a decisive political role. It formed the majority of the cadres of the Jana Sangh (a nationalist party founded in 1951), as well as the BJP. Thanks to the massive educational works conducted by the RSS for more than 75 years, and thanks to the millions of hardened militants that formed and led the BJP, the latter managed to eventually take power. Having undergone an electoral defeat in 2004, the actions of the RSS continued, paving roads for ulterior successes and continuing to revive the tradition in the hearts of the Indian people. This experience is made far more interesting by the fact that it has taken place in a multicultural and multiracial society where communal conflicts are recurring.

These Hindu reformists were idealists that understood the importance of political action, all the while understanding that it was

not essential. It was but an aleatory instrument in the service of a higher goal. Such an instrument had to be shouldered, but within its own limitations. Before taking part in politics, the Hinduists first made a return to the source of their tradition. They knew that without this prerequisite, all their work would have been for naught. They sought to thread a living network around their tradition, encouraging its renaissance. The spiritual height of the stakes, their significance, and their permanence protected them from the consequences of human imperfection, deception, and the misfortunes of activism. I know that a few analogous initiatives have begun to develop in France and Europe on a much smaller scale. These represent a great hope for the future.

PL: Are such institutions conceivable in Europe?

DV: As of right now, they exist in small numbers. Certain scout movements with identitarian vocations, separated from the old, decadent 'official' scoutism, have such an objective and carry it out rather well, supported by networks of adults who are veterans of similar movements. In their wake we may see the formation of student centres. There are also cultural initiatives. In France, there is *La Nouvelle Revue d'Histoire*.^[10] But in the future, a renewal of political militancy could act in the same way.

PL: What exactly are you thinking of?

DV: The history of enduring religious institutions is rich with teachings, notably that of the Catholic Church. Looked at historically and not through eyes clouded by faith, this institution exhibits a few rarely studied reasons for its permanence. Its permanence is due in part to eschatological perspectives, faith in an all-powerful and helpful creator God, the incarnation of this mysterious God in three figures, and the promise of salvation in another world. These aspects are not subordinate to the trials of success and failure. The believer by definition refuses any and all critical examinations applied by a historian,^[11] but such examination attracts attention to a permanent dialectic between two major components of all revealed religions: the men in power and the 'mystic body'.

Studies of Catholicism do not do enough to emphasise that, since

the beginning, the Church has most often been led by men of power, great politicians as it were. These can, of course, be men of faith. But they were first and foremost men made to command and manoeuvre like Machiavelli's proverbial Prince. Pope Gelasius in the days of Constantine, Leo III, Gregory VII, Urban II, Innocent IV, Julius II, Innocent X, Pius V, Pius IX, Leo XIII... a truly endless list of popes, but also of bishops, in addition to the founders of the monastic orders who would later become politicians in their own right, intervening with authority in the affairs of their time and leading the complex functioning of Catholicism with great sagacity.

At the end of the fourth century, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire by way of an Imperial edict, and the Church thus became one of the greatest temporal powers in the West. Benefitting from immense riches, its authority applied to the governing of affairs and men as much as to that of souls. Initially recruited from the Gallo-Roman senatorial class, these bishops were the princes of their time, charged with the administration and government of their dioceses with the consent of local sovereigns. The title *Monseigneur*, which has survived, comes from this period in which they were often at odds with lay princes.

PL: What are you getting at?

DV: The history of the Church is not solely made up of mitred princes, submissive clergy, and faithful followers. If we separate interpretations based on faith and stick with historical facts, the secret of its durability, like that of other concurrent religions, besides the extraordinary institutional heritage of Rome and of the fight against heresy,^[12] rests upon the dialectic between men of power and what we could call the 'mystic body'. This latter title includes a part of the clergy, some monastic orders, certain congregations, and a number of theologians.

The 'mystic body' has not ceased to exercise a sort of contentious surveillance upon the men of power at the heart of the Church. This duality seems to have been the cause of the historical success of the Church, but also of its many schisms and heresies, the most significant of which were the Lutheran and Calvinist reformations.

The concept of reformation is, in and of itself, an integral part of the history of Christianity and of the Church. Men of power have often directed the strength that they possessed in directions far removed from the evangelical message that justified the institution's existence. In a recurring way, the 'mystic body' had as implicit function, through the pressures, resistances, negotiations, and open conflicts, to watch over the men of power and to bring them back, through lasting reforms, to the foundations of Catholicism.

In our new world, passably de-Christianised, born of the century of revolutions, we have seen political religions substitute themselves for the ancient religions of salvation. Whereas men of power (and oftentimes men of faith, in their own way) were at the head of these revolutions, there have also been the imprecise outlines of a 'mystic body' that lacked the time to exercise its function.

PL: When speaking of 'mystic bodies' as they apply to political movements, what exactly do you mean?

DV: When politics became likened to religion, the 'mystic body' was implicitly constituted by all those militants, cadres, and active intellectuals who entered into politics as 'one enters into a religion'. These were, in a way, the guarantors of a 'permanent revolution' which is equally as important in the creation of a new man in society as the more permanent reforms had been for the Church. Unfortunately, the rigid and summary nature of these parties, in addition to their brief duration and their very nature as political entities, have not allowed these political 'mystic bodies' to exist and deploy themselves with the same amount of autonomy as their religious counterparts.

It isn't hard to imagine that in the future, in new historical configurations, new kinds of militant 'mystic bodies', endowed with durable institutions, will begin to form on the margins of the political sphere, in order to make up the formative structure of a leading class bolstered by a strong identitarian conscience and a voluntary acceptance of higher goals.

[1] *The Fascist Religion* (Paris: Perrin, 2002). No English version exists.—Ed.

[2] *The Edge of the Sword* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960).

[3] 'Defense of the Occident'.—Tr.

- [4] *What is Fascism?* (Paris: Les Sept couleurs, 1961). No English version exists, although some excerpts were published in English on the *Counter-Currents* Website.—Ed.
- [5] The Bardèche quotes were borrowed from Greg Johnson's translation of *What is Fascism?* published on the *Counter Currents* Website, available at www.counter-currents.com/2013/10/the-fascist-dream-part-3/.—Tr.
- [6] *The Psychology of Revolution* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2004).—Ed.
- [7] From a speech given on 19 May 1935, in José Antonio Primo de Rivera, *The Spanish Contribution to Political Thought* (London: Black Front Press, 2013), pp. 144–145.—Ed.
- [8] The BJP was returned to power in the 2014 national elections.—Ed.
- [9] Bal Ganghadar Tilak (1856–1920) was an Indian nationalist and the founder of the Indian Independence Movement. Unlike Gandhi, he believed that violent resistance was the only way to expel the British from India. He is also notable as the author of *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* (London: Arktos, 2011), in which he argued that the Arctic had been the original homeland of the Aryans who eventually settled in India.—Ed.
- [10] 'New Historical Journal'.—Tr.
- [11] Jean-Pierre Moisset's *Histoire du catholicisme* (History of Catholicism — Paris: Flammarion, 2006) is a good source to draw from in this regard, especially the first five chapters, which are dedicated to the birth and transformations of the new religion over the course of the first ten centuries of its existence. Another good source is Guy Rachet's *Les Racines de notre Europe sont-elles chrétiennes ou musulmanes?* (Are the Roots of Europe Christian or Muslim? — Paris: Jean Picollec, 2011), Chapters 3 & 6).
- [12] Pierre de Meuse, *Histoire des hérésies* (Escalquens: Éditions Trajectoire, 2010).

Epilogue: History and Memory

PAULINE LECOMTE: You have entitled this book of interviews *The Breviary of the Unbowed*^[1] in order to collect your personal thoughts on the history and fate of Europeans. You have observed a shock of history, a shock with multiple effects. You have first demonstrated that we cannot understand the enigmas of the world in which we live without first understanding the events from which it was born. Moreover, you have shown that historical reflection is an indispensable response to the deadlocked thinking of our age. Finally, you have insisted on the vital necessity of awakening the European memory. In conclusion, let us return to the beginning. What is history?

DOMINIQUE VENNER: According to the most simple definition, history is knowledge of the past. But this knowledge is not neutral. It incites reflection on events of the past in order to illuminate the present. Not Babylon, nor ancient China, nor Egypt, nor the various Semite civilisations of the past have considered history in this precise sense. History conceived of as a reflection on the past is an invention of the European mind. In his epic relation of the Trojan War, Homer laid the foundations for it. This is why Hellenic historians who succeeded him considered the famous siege evoked in the *Iliad* as the beginning of history. In more precise terms, the true inventor of history is Herodotus, who lived in Ionia in the transitional period of the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. Cicero rightly called him the ‘father of history’. Shortly after Herodotus, there was Thucydides, witness to and participant in the Peloponnesian War. Free from passion and moral judgement, he remains a great role model even after twenty-five centuries. Among many others, Hippolyte Taine eulogises him: ‘He walks among murders, seditions, plagues, like a man emancipated from humanity, who, with eyes firmly fixed upon what is true, cannot debase himself to the point of anger and pity.’ From his cold descriptions surges an implicit lesson. Thucydides demonstrates how, carried along by their pride and desire for power, the Athenians

hastened their own demise. With him, history undertakes an educational function for the benefit of future generations.

Two centuries after Thucydides, another Greek historian, Polybus, decreed that the purpose of history was to find causal explanation for great events. Greece having been conquered by Rome at Pydna in 168 BCE, he held a great admiration for his conquerors, and worked to understand how and why a small Italic republic managed to take over the Mediterranean in a period of fifty years. He was the first to inquire about causation in history. The number of his descendants was immense.

PL: Does history also have an instructive function?

DV: History is not just knowledge of the past, it is a reflection of the preoccupations of the present. This was as true for Thucydides and Polybus as it was for the Roman historians Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus. All three were interested in lessons that could oppose the decadence and corruption of their times. In their own ways, each one created a literary work, constructed a story, and exerted an intrigue. If they have survived up to the present, and if they are still read, it is for the factual nature of what they can teach us, for the depth of their thought, and also for the quality of their narration, an art that is all their own.

Destroyed by theology during the long Christian centuries, history reappeared in the sixteenth century with Machiavelli. It would then blossom in the eighteenth century with Vico,^[2] who gave birth to the first philosophy of history which re-established a cyclical interpretation of it. Next came Gibbon and his monumental study of the fall of the Roman Empire, Schiller who wrote from a causalist perspective, Dilthey who founded historical relativism, and many more.

PL: Is history a science?

DV: The ancient world answered this in its own way. The Muse Clio placed history within the realm of the arts. Conversely, historians who claim that history is exclusively scientific act as though they hold a superior position, all the while working under the false pretence of objective neutrality. But who can believe that 'science', so often invoked in the twentieth century by lying ideologues, is a guarantee of

impartiality? The sciences of the mind do not consider reality as an abstract construct as do the physical and mathematical sciences, but as something to be understood intuitively, as a result of a psychological understanding of things as they are lived. This is why history remains an art of interpretation.

PL: How do you distinguish history and memory?

DV: While history is the domain of the memorable, memory, so often invoked since the end of the twentieth century, is separate from history. History is factual and philosophical, while memory is mythical and foundational. Jewish memory before the Shoah, for example, was rooted in the legend of the Egyptian Exodus, which manifested the solicitude of Yahweh to his people. Conversely, Hellenic memory is rooted in Homeric poetry, in the exemplary nature of heroes in the face of destiny. Orwell understood the modern stakes of history and memory quite well. In 1984, he states that 'he who controls the past controls the future; he who controls the present controls the past'. What Europeans have experienced since the second half of the twentieth century perfectly illustrates his statement. Moving from arrogance to masochism, Europeans have endeavoured to chase away their old feelings of ethnocentrism, all the while flattering similar sentiments in other races and cultures. Great efforts have been made to break the course and coherence of time in order to stop Europeans from finding their likeness in images of their ancestors, to strip them of their past and estrange them from it. Resistance to this is recurring, and often originates from the most unexpected places. Like the legend of Sleeping Beauty, dormant memories will awaken.

PL: Have men always wondered who they are?

DV: Yes, and they have always answered this question by implicitly invoking their lineage, language, religion, and customs, that is to say their identity and their tradition. Being of a people is the necessary anchor of identity. But a human group is not a people unless it shares like origins, in a specific location, commanding a space, giving it direction and a border between the inside and the outside. This location, this space, is not only geographic, but spiritual too. That

said, the location is here, not elsewhere. That is why the singular nature of a people affirms itself in the way they work the soil, the wood, the rock, in what they build, what they create, and what they do. Every people has a personal way of relating to space and time. The moment of the African is not the same as that of the Asian, and punctuality is not the same in Zurich as it is in Riyadh.

As the repository of a unique treasure, every historical community has legitimately considered itself the chosen people of its own gods. Through the form they inherit, every people has its own path. Their vocation is to hold onto it through hazards and changes, by confronting threats from inside and out.

PL: In your essay *History and Tradition of the Europeans*, you said that history could be considered a metaphysic. What do you mean by that?

DV: To speak of a ‘metaphysics of history’ is not to paint it with a metaphysical doctrine that escapes reality, but to understand the entirety of its metaphysical range. What history reveals goes beyond the facts, beyond the ‘physical’, and beyond the mere restitution of the facts of the past. History creates sense. In the ephemeral nature of the human condition, it is a manifestation of eternity and tradition. By saving the memories of our forebears from the depths of oblivion, it steps into the future. It fulfils the inherent human desire for posterity, the desire to survive one’s own death and make it into the memory of future generations. The hope of leaving a trace upon their memory is why we endeavour to forge the future. Passing on their lineage was one of the means by which our ancestors escaped the confines of their finite existence.

[1] *Le Bréviaire des insoumis*.—Ed.

[2] Giambattista Vico (1668–1774) was an Italian philosopher who is best known for his book, *The New Science*, in which he outlined a cyclical theory of civilisations as progressing through three ages: the divine, the heroic, and the human age.—Ed.

About the Author

Dominique Venner (1935–2013) was a writer and historian. He published roughly fifty books and edited a number of historical and literary collections, in addition to two historical journals. His vocation was guided by his life experience. Commenting upon his book *Le Siècle de 1914* (2006), the magazine *Le Spectacle du monde* wrote that he ‘offers a deep reflection on the fate of Europe over the last hundred years, a reflection that synthesises and continues the one he started in his previous works on the twentieth century, but that also builds upon the developments of his other work, *Histoire et Tradition des Européens* (2002). The originality of Dominique Venner’s work rests in his ability to shed light on European history by looking at it in the long term’. Three major works make up the successive foundations necessary to understanding his career: *Le Cœur rebelle*, *Dictionnaire amoureux de la Chasse*, and *Le Siècle de 1914*, to which we must also add *Histoire et tradition des Européens*, which stands apart.

Dominique Venner was born in Paris on 16 April 1935; he had five children.

Like Jacques Bainville, Henri Amouroux, and Jacques Benoist-Méchin before him, he made his way into the study of history through historical journalism. After finishing secondary school, and before discovering his interest in art and weapons, he joined the army on the day of his eighteenth birthday. He then volunteered to fight in Algeria, where he remained until October 1956. This was an important milestone that ushered him into a decade of intense political activism, culminating in the creation of a journal entitled *Europe-Action*. Dominique Venner evokes these formative years in his book *Le Cœur rebelle* (Belles Lettres, 1994), a reflective work on his activism, and a significant milestone on his journey.

Around 1970, he definitively cut all ties with his political activities, which he asserted was not his vocation. Around this time he left Paris in order to live closer to the forests that inspired him, living through his pen. Year after year, he continued to publish a great

number of books, collaborated with the press, and studied the unsung history of weapons and hunting. This portion of his life would eventually be capped off with the publication of *Dictionnaire amoureux de la Chasse*, published by Plon in 2000.

In the meantime, Dominique Venner wrote a number of books on contemporary history, starting with *Baltikum* (Robert Laffont, 1974), about the German *Freikorps* that had been active between 1919 and 1923. He would later give this material a second look in *Histoire d'un fascisme allemand, 1919–1934*, enriched by his correspondence with Ernst Jünger. Several other historical works would follow: *Le Blanc Soleil des vaincus*, (La Table Ronde, 1975) about the American Civil War; *Histoire de l'Armée rouge* (Plon, 1981), which earned him recognition by the *Académie française*; *Gettysburg* (Le Rocher, 1995); *Histoire critique de la Résistance* (Pygmalion, 1995/2002); *Les Blanc et les Rouges: Histoire de la guerre civile russe* (Pygmalion, 1997, republished and updated in 2007); *Histoire de la Collaboration* (Pygmalion, 2000/2002); *Histoire du terrorisme* (Pygmalion, 2002); *De Gaulle, la grandeur et le néant* (Le Rocher, 2004); and *Le Siècle de 1914* (Pygmalion, 2006).

Parallel to his works on contemporary history, Dominique Venner published his *Histoire et tradition des Européens: 30.000 ans d'identité* (2002/2004), a work that seeks out the source of European tradition beginning with Homer.

In 1989, he founded a historical journal, *Enquête sur l'histoire*. This publication would last for about a decade, until in 2002, with the help of a few fellow historians, he founded *La Nouvelle Revue d'Histoire*, a pioneering historical journal in both content and form.

On 21 May 2013, Dominique Venner decided to end his own life shortly after writing his last book, *Un samouraï d'Occident* (Pierre-Guillaume de Roux, 2013). His intention in doing so was to awaken the dormant minds of his compatriots. His legacy lives on through his influence, his writing, and his final solemn gesture.

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